Talking Heads Series

'Communication'

Verbal Arts Centre, Derry

Remarks by John Hume

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Ladies and gentlemen, before I begin to share my thoughts, I would first like to communicate my thanks to the Verbal Arts Centre for being invited to speak to you today as part of the 'Talking Heads' series and to each and everyone of you for coming here this afternoon.

I have been asked to speak to you this afternoon on the topic of 'Communication'.

I am conscious that I stand before you in the Verbal Arts Centre, my second occasion to speak here over the course of this weekend. In my political life in particular, words and dialogue have played a central role. However, before I proceed to treat of that matter, I want to talk to you about one act of communication which was not important for its use of verbs or of any words, but for its imagery.

In the week of the Good Friday Agreement referendum in 1998, those of us campaigning for a Yes vote utilised the media to the advantage of the pro-Agreement cause. Some of you may recall the concert for a Yes vote held in the Waterfront Hall in Belfast on the Tuesday evening before the referendum.

We in the SDLP had discreetly worked within an extremely tight timeframe to put together a major event in support of the Good Friday Agreement. I contacted Bono from U2 and asked if they would be willing to come to Belfast to show their support for the Agreement.

They agreed immediately and on a warm Tuesday evening in front of thousands of local young people Bono brought myself and the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble, together on stage for a handshake that symbolised everything the Good Friday Agreement is all about.

That was one of the most emotional and powerful things I ever had the privilege to be involved in over the last thirty years. The images broadcast around the world that evening, throughout the next day and for the remaining days of the referendum campaign were extremely positive and I am in no doubt they swung a significant proportion of the vote in favour of the Agreement.

In fact, polling figures from that week estimate that the Anti-Agreement campaign for a No vote was on course to secure more than half of the Unionist electorate's support until the Yes concert took place. Had this happened, the Agreement would have been fundamentally undermined as the historic democratic compromise between the two major traditions on the island of Ireland.

However, when people saw so many young people in such a positive exclamation of support for a better future through the

Agreement, the polls swung substantially towards support for the Agreement and the referendum result, 71.12% in favour of the Agreement, tells its own story.

In a week which has been devoid of such jubilation, we do well to remember the enthusiasm of those young people communicated by those pictures at the Waterfront Hall.

I should now wish to make a few comments on the importance of language. More correctly, of languages. I am fortunate to have been schooled well in French, both in St. Columb's College and in Maynooth. This has not only influenced my attitudes to Europe, but has given me more influence in Europe than would otherwise have been the case.

It is of vital importance that our children are given the opportunity to learn modern languages from an early age, and we should move towards a situation where we teach modern languages from primary school.

Education is the most potent force for change. It is the key to the unlocking of rights. It is the high tide on which democracy can sail. It is the foundation stone of economic development. In the broadest sense, it is a cornerstone of communication.

I am reminded of Daton's words:

"Aprés le pain, l'éducation est le premier besoin du peuple."

I, like many in this room, owe much to education. I passed the 11+ in its first year. I was one of the first generation of people to benefit from the 1947 Education Act that unlocked the door to university for working-class communities in the North. Through this, communities were for the first time made aware of the lexicon of rights. From that flowed the opportunity to secure equality and justice.

Of course, I came into public life through the 'University for Derry' campaign in the mid 1960s. I had already been involved in community development through the credit union movement. We campaigned for that university because we understood the importance of third level education to the future development of our city and region. It is a passion of mine to this day.

That unsuccessful campaign led to my involvement in the civil rights movement. Out of that we went on in 1970 to form the SDLP, as a political platform through which to carry forward our civil rights agenda.

It was, of course, through the SDLP that we addressed the problem of our conflict. That process, as you will know, was ultimately to lead to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Central to our purpose, though, was the drive to deal with social and economic problems. Right up to the present day, our party believes that bread and butter issues must be tackled, not forgotten about in the negotiations of process.

The job of politicians, first and foremost, is to prevent conflict through the management of difference. Communication, through dialogue, is central to the prevention and removal of conflict.

While this may at first seem an intractable task, there is one essential principle on which we must proceed. We must recognise that all conflict is about difference. The logical corollary to this is that we need to create a culture of respect for difference and diversity and establish institutions which recognise, respect and promote that difference. Through those institutions we can work in our common interests, breaking down mistrust and building confidence. As I have often said, we must spill our sweat and not our blood. This is the principle that has guided me throughout my political life.

Above all, we must talk to each other; enemy as well as friend.

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 represented the exfoliation of an historical burden of conflict and inequality that had been weighed down upon the people of Ireland, North and South. The Good Friday Agreement is the contractual manifestation of the recognition of diversity in Ireland; within Northern Ireland, between North and South and indeed between these islands.

It signifies a shift from the past, no longer can Irish nationalism look to progress its aims by a simplistic notion of reclaiming 'the fourth green field', while unionism can no longer seek to hold control from nationalists within the North. Both traditions have agreed to work

democratic institutions which respect difference and the multitude of identities in order to co-operate on matters of common concern.

It is about shifting our energies from conflict to creating positive relationships that will foster trust and will be of mutual advantage. It places the people of Ireland above territory. After all, without its people, even Ireland is nothing but jungle.

Notwithstanding the current difficulties being faced with the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive, that shift has been made and a rubicon has been crossed. Unionism can not derecognise the right of nationalists to share power together with unionists in Northern Ireland nor can the need for institutions that reflect the all-Ireland aspirations of nationalists again be denied. Nationalists must recognise that the unionist identity must be cherished and that a united Ireland can only come about through persuasion, not coercion.

The Agreement is not open for renegotiation. It is incumbent now upon all parties and groups to uphold the democratic will of the people of Ireland, North and South, and fulfil their obligations so that that will is respected. The Republican Movement must put an end to all paramilitary activity as outlined in the Joint Declaration by the two governments. On the other hand, unionism must commit itself wholeheartedly to full participation in all the institutions set up under the Agreement.

The people have mandated them to do so. The ratification of the Agreement through referendum was a clear communication to those charged with implementing it in full and in good faith on behalf of the Irish people.

We must remember that the Agreement was the result of an inclusive process based on the primacy of dialogue between all of the parties. This has been absent of late and we have all witnessed the situation in which we now find ourselves. It is vital that the principle of inclusive negotiations, involving all of the party's elected by the people to implement the Agreement, is restored so that the process can be put back on track. That is the only way that progress will occur.

Europe, too, has seen enormous change in the past half century. The Second World War represented the final descent towards a nadir in human history, which would see killing on our continent on an unprecedented and industrial scale and would see the unleashing of the murderous potential of the atomic bomb. A war which saw the deaths of 40 million people.

That war represented the third major conflict between the peoples of France and Germany in the preceding century. At the end of that awful war, nobody would have believed that the future direction of Europe would change to such a degree that just over half a century later, there would not have been another such conflict between those two historic enemies.

That is the basis of the European Union. The process of European Integration sought to bring an end to conflict on our continent by the creation of common institutions through which we could work on areas of common interest. Those institutions, the Council of Ministers, the European Parliament and the Commission, are the embodiment of that spirit of integration which has seen unprecedented prosperity.

Through these institutions, we pursue our common interests and resolve our disagreements in dialogue. We communicate through the force of argument, not the force of arms. And the people of Europe are the better off for it.

The current phase of development of the European Union is a particularly exciting and challenging one. The process of enlargement into central and eastern Europe that has begun represents a natural and proper fulfilment of the European vision. For the greatest part of my life, Europe has been artificially divided. This will be brought to its deserved end when the accession states join the Union in 2004. They can then take their place again at the heart of the European family.

It is worth considering the importance of the European Union to Ireland.

It is true that the European Union has been financially beneficial to Ireland, both North and South. However, while they have been very welcome and important, direct financial transfers such as through the

structural funds, the regional development funds and indeed the PEACE monies in the north of the island have only represented one aspect of that benefit. As important, for example, has been the support given to agriculture under the Common Agricultural Policy for farmers and rural communities throughout our island.

Critically important, also, has been membership of the largest single market in the world, the Single European Market. This has been particularly important in attracting non-European investors to Ireland. It is one of the reasons we have been able to attract foreign investment to Derry in the past, for example, and it is very doubtful if the 'Celtic Tiger' phenomenon would ever have occurred without access to that huge market. That market is set to increase to one of over 500 million people following enlargement.

Equally important dividends have derived from EU membership in areas other than economics. Membership of the EU has been vital in strengthening protection for workers' rights, for women and for eliminating other forms of discrimination. Our environment is cleaner and safer due to the high standards expected under European safeguards.

Ireland as a whole is more confident and outward looking. Many of our young people speak more than one language, and consider themselves as much at ease in Barcelona or Budapest as in Dublin or Derry.

Just as the end of the Second World War saw the start of a process of European integration designed to end war on this continent, that process was reflected on a global level by the establishment of the United Nations. While the United Nations was and remains a very different type of organisation to even the initial European Economic Community set up by the Treaty of Rome, it remains the case that the UN was set up with a view to eliminating violent conflict based upon the principles of international law.

In short, the UN, like the EU, is about promoting dialogue over power-politics.

Unfortunately, for much of its existence the United Nations has been subject to the effects of a battle for global geopolitical and ideological domination which we came to refer to as the Cold War. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, many had hoped that the United Nations would develop a role as guardian of international law and promoter of peace in a more multi-polar world.

Regardless of the inadequacies, progress had been made to this end under the US presidency of Bill Clinton, a man who was a good friend to Ireland. Unfortunately, much of the good work done during the previous decade has been undermined, such as the refusal of the United States administration to honour the Kyoto protocol on controlling climate change[1].

[1] The Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement signed in Japan in 1998 to reduce air pollution so that global warming can be reduced - the George W. Bush administration has

More recently, we have seen the usurpation of international law with the invasion of Iraq by the United States and the UK without United Nations approval. We saw military might hold sway over the case for dialogue. We now witness the terrible consequences of this for th ordinary people of Iraq, for the young soldiers who were sent there and for the region as a whole.

When one considers these developments alongside the failure of the United States to give proper status to prisoners captured during the war in Afghanistan, the moral weight of the international community is undermined[2].

At a time when, for example, international pressure is mounting on the Burmese military regime to release Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from imprisonment, such failings on the part of major international powers are most unhelpful. This moral ambivalence does nothing either to help in the international campaign for democracy and the guaranteeing of human rights in Zimbabwe.

I have spoken of the importance of co-operation in the political field within these islands, within Europe and at a global level. Such co-

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decided not to honour that agreement which Clinton signed - the US is the world's largest producer of air pollution

[2] These prisoners are being held by the US military at their Guantanamo Bay base in Cuba - they are not being afforded due process either as criminals or prisoners of war - this is against the Geneva convention - essentially the same as indefinite internment without trial

operation is so important because we are living in the middle of the greatest transformation in the history of the world, the global technological, transport and telecommunications revolution.

The world is a smaller place now than it has ever been. Communication today is as easy from Derry to Durban as it was from one street to the next when I was a boy.

These advances put us in a stronger position than anyone in history to shape the future of that world. Our aim should be to build a world of peace and justice, where there is no more conflict. Our method should be the sending the philosophy of conflict resolution of the European Union.

Modernisation has fundamentally altered the way that society operates, and politics has had to and must continue to adapt to this in order to remain relevant and to both prevent and resolve problems which society may face arising out of this new social and economic order.

The Foot & Mouth crisis demonstrated the effectiveness of an all-island approach to animal welfare. Chernobyl and the massive industrial pollution that developed in the former eastern bloc convinced Europe of the need for transnational environmental safeguards to protect our air and land environments. Dialogue and co–operation have been central to pursuing these objectives across borders.

The current injustice in world trade, where developing countries are not allowed fair access to first world markets, has convinced many of the need for a global response to this problem through the international trade frameworks and related governmental and commercial initiatives. From this corner of this small island, we should communicate a message that globalisation of justice and prosperity must be a priority for the international community.

We have witnessed a shift from a predominantly agrarian and agricultural economy in Ireland to one that is predominantly industrialised and knowledge-based.

Not unrelated to that has been the shift from education for the privileged few to a system of education for the masses

The fact that our young people are now educated almost universally at second level and that a significant majority of them have further or higher education or high levels of manual craft training allows us to attract knowledge based industry. We must use our brains as much as our brawn if we are to create, attract and secure employment for our people.

A priority for all of us, whether we live north or south of the border, is that we should never again allow such a tragic drain of our best resource, our people, as occurred in the past through forced emigration from our island. At the same time, the choice must not be one of 'go abroad or live in Dublin or Belfast'. Young people must

have the opportunity to live and to fulfil their potential in our regions if they so wish.

Progress requires balanced regional development to rectify decades of neglect and under-investment. Well-laid spatial plans must be met with action. This is a message that must be sent our ever stronger to those in power.

It is certainly arguable that the rate of social change in Ireland is now exponential, and the change that has been witnessed both North and South has been unprecedented. For many, two words come to mind when one thinks of Ireland in the 1990s: 'Celtic Tiger'. While it was essentially a southern, or arguably a south-eastern phenomenon, its effects were undoubtedly felt in Northern Ireland.

One often overlooked fact is that the economic growth pattern that became known as the 'Celtic Tiger' coincided with the period of economic readjustment on the island that followed the announcement of the ceasefires. While the rate of growth in the North has not been as impressive as has been witnessed in the South, it remains the case that economic growth has increased significantly and that Northern Ireland has benefited both from the ceasefires and from the South's economic boom.

This was in large part born of the inclusive dialogue that delivered the peace process and the Agreement.

I would like to turn to another matter. One unfortunate consequence of the economic growth of the past decade has been an increase in focus on the materialistic in life to the neglect of other aspects. Family life has too often suffered as parents focus on work to the detriment of enjoying their families. In some instances there has also been a lessening of community spirit. Perhaps most disappointingly has been the failure to lift every boat on the rising tide, as poverty and social exclusion is still all too common.

Irish society has also had to face a new challenge, that of reconciling itself with becoming multi-cultural in character. It is indisputable that the economic boom attracted people to Ireland who, for various reasons, would not have chosen to come to Ireland previously, not least because of 'The Troubles'. Irish people for centuries have been forced to leave these shores, for both reasons of economic desperation and of political and religious persecution. We hold in our folk memory a deep sense of injustice, persecution and suffering, particularly on our western seaboard.

It is all the more pressing, for these reasons, that we should welcome those who come here to seek refuge or asylum. Wherever one looks in the world, economics alone tell us that those who immigrate into a country add much more to it than they receive. Besides, those who seek shelter here add a richness and diversity to our country which we should all embrace.

The scourge of racism, which has raised its ugly head, should be rejected by all Irish people who have suffered so much at the bigotry

of others. Racism is the antithesis of the values of true republicanism and equality.

It is important that we have a healthy debate, North and South, about how we can counter sectarianism and racism where ever and when ever they appear.

I would like to consider is an event that occurred earlier this summer. I am one of those who believes that the hosting of the Special Olympics World Games represented a defining moment for contemporary Ireland. I was present at the opening ceremony in Croke Park, and nobody could fail to have been impressed and inspired both by the professionalism of the organisation or the passion of the participants. A wonderful picture of Ireland radiated around the world.

However, the bigger story of the Games has not been the awe of the opening ceremony, but the sense of shared purpose between North and South, the renewal of community spirit in communities across Ireland and the exchange of warmth and emotion between all involved, volunteers, hosts, visitors and athletes alike. Those athletes delivered a message to each of us about the magnificence of the human spirit.

We may look back on these days as a time when not only did Ireland say goodbye to the Celtic Tiger, but Ireland reclaimed some of those best traditions and values, of generosity, of compassion and of belief

in the primacy of the human spirit which were sometimes washed out to sea during the days of the boom.

Change is brought about by people. Our own peace process in Ireland was not alone about the force of political argument and negotiations, it was and continues to be about individuals and communities reaching out the hand of friendship and co-operation with others and working together. In short, it has been about communication between local communities and local people as about politicians in large buildings.

The incremental change demonstrated by the force of argument and of politics, like that of the river, is a more determined, certain and lasting force than the revolutionary charge of the sword.

These are but a few of my thoughts on the importance of 'communication'. Above all else, communication for me is about dialogue. Whether we use e-mail, long-distance phone calls or simple old-fashioned word of mouth, real dialogue is always about sharing one's own ideas and listening to the ideas of the other person. That is the way to end conflict, to promote prosperity and to create community.

I would like to finish with the words of Martin Luther King Junior; *"Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue."*