

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Address by Mr John Hume, MP, MEP, to Members of Congress,
Hershey, Pennsylvania,
19 March 1999

As you may be aware, this is a special week for Irish people throughout the world as we celebrate St. Patrick's Day. But I was pleased to discover that, by coincidence, it is also a week when the people of Pennsylvania remember their heritage, as they mark the 318th anniversary of the founding of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania by William Penn.

William Penn was a noble and visionary individual.

A Quaker, he journeyed to the New World seeking a refuge and a haven for those who, like himself, endured persecution and religious intolerance in Europe.

A man of peace, he travelled to America with a vision of a place where tolerance and respect for human rights would be the touchstones of a better life. A place where people would enjoy representative government and where they would be guaranteed the liberty of conscience denied to them elsewhere.

Those enduring values were his bequest not only to the people of Pennsylvania, but to the United States and the world. They are values that have inspired me throughout my political life during the past thirty years.

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I have never made a secret of my admiration for the United States - for the very idea of the place as encapsulated in the motto on its Great Seal - "E Pluribus Unum", Out of Many, One.

For the United States has long stood as a demonstration to the world that diversity, rather than being a cause of conflict and division, can be a powerful motor, generating great creativity, energy and dynamism. It has demonstrated that in uniting people, it is possible to build a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts.

From the very beginning of my public life, I have been hugely influenced by events in the United States and, perhaps, by one American more than by any other individual.

Earlier this year I was humbled to receive an award named in honour of one of my greatest heroes, Martin Luther King - a giant of this century, a man who had the most profound influence on my life. Dr. King, and his colleagues in the civil rights movement, sent a clarion call to every corner of the world.

They demonstrated that it was possible to change the most powerful society in the world, armed only with courage, conviction and an unshakeable commitment to the truth, and win.

They demonstrated that the quest for justice, equality and dignity could be advanced most successfully by those who refused, as he put it, to 'drink from the cup of bitterness and hatred' - by those who unswervingly travelled the path of peace.

That powerful message - that moral force alone could break the chains of oppression, of rancour, of division - was the driving force behind the civil rights movement that inspired many, like me, who sought a peaceful way forward in societies throughout the world which were struggling with conflict.

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In the 1960's Northern Ireland was a place where deep grievances about our history, about discrimination, about lack of civil rights, and about social and economic marginalisation had entrenched division among the people and bred a legitimate anger. In my home town, Derry, I saw democratic rights ritually set aside in favour of the vested interests of those running the state.

At the same time I saw the dream of equality, freedom and dignity of the individual that Martin Luther King embodied help shape the Northern Ireland civil rights movement that emerged in the closing years of the 1960's.

Inspired and guided by the moral philosophy of non-violence, I felt it my duty to help shape and guide the growing movement for civil rights in Northern Ireland. Later the same impulses inspired the SDLP, the party I helped found as a vehicle for non-violent constitutional nationalism.

In seeking a way forward we did not seek ideological confrontation. We did not seek to inflict suffering. We believed that we would accomplish more through suffering and enduring for our own beliefs. We believed in inclusivity, not exclusivity. We believed in peace and in the ability of human beings to find and recognise their common humanity. We believed in a unity among all Irish people, Protestant and Catholic, Nationalist and Unionist - a unity of the heart, the only true unity.

These beliefs have sustained me throughout the long dark years of violence the people of the North of Ireland have endured over the past three decades. Through all of the suffering, the grief and the tragedy which we have inflicted on each other. And most recently, throughout the ups and downs of the peace process.

And if I looked to the United States for inspiration, I also learned many instructive lessons from my experience in Europe.

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There is a story that I often tell - indeed there are very probably people here who could tell it better than I can now - but it is still worth repeating. The story is both simple and profound - and applicable to conflict resolution anywhere in the world.

On my first visit to Strasbourg in 1979 as a member of the European Parliament, I went for a walk across the bridge from Strasbourg to Kehl. Strasbourg is in France, Kehl is in Germany. They are very close. I stopped in the middle of the bridge and I meditated. There is Germany, there is France. If I had stood on this bridge 30 years ago after the end of the Second World War when 25 million people lay dead across the continent for the second time in this century and if I had said:" Don't worry. In 30 years time we will all be together in a new Europe, our conflicts and wars will be ended and we will be working together in our common interests", people would have thought me mad.

But it happened and it is now clear that European Union is one of the best examples in the history of the world of conflict resolution.

All conflict is about difference, whether of race, religion or nationality. What the architects of European Union have demonstrated is that difference need not be a threat. Difference is natural. Difference is the essence of humanity. Difference should never be a source of hatred or conflict. The response to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace - respect for diversity.

The people of Europe in throwing in their lot together have broken down centuries-old barriers of distrust, allowing a new Europe, a Europe based on agreement and respect for difference, to evolve.

That taught me a profound lesson - once we have embraced our diversity and difference, together we can set about building institutions that, while they respect that

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difference, allow us to work together for our common benefit.

Throughout the long and difficult process that led to agreement between the Northern Ireland parties in Belfast last Easter, I drew great sustenance from those two sets of ideas - from the movement for civil rights in the United States the notion that injustice could best be confronted and overcome peacefully with moral force; and from Europe, the idea that no conflict was so old or so deeply set that it could not be resolved with respect for difference and celebration of diversity.

The Agreement was, of course, the result of years of effort on the part of many people, both those who worked under the strong public spotlight and those who carried out their no less important work in the shadows behind the scenes. Not the least among those who created the context in which Agreement could be achieved were the ordinary people in communities from both traditions who yearned for peace and who willed their political leaders to secure it.

The process was long and it was difficult. It had to be.

I was convinced from the outset that to succeed, any process that sought to remove the causes of our conflict would have to be fully inclusive. For the first time it would have to involve all of our people - Nationalists and Unionists, Loyalists and Republicans. The two Governments would have to be fully committed. We would, I had no doubt, need the continued support and encouragement of all those throughout the world who wished Ireland well.

To achieve support from all sides it would need to address what became known as the 'totality of relations' - relations between the people of Northern Ireland, relations between Ireland North and South and relations between the islands of Ireland and Britain.

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Given our history, any Agreement would have to include serious provision for the protection of human rights and for the promotion of equality and parity of esteem between the two communities. It would also have to address difficult and divisive issues such as the future of our policing, security issues, decommissioning.

The Agreement that emerged on Good Friday is an honourable document. To secure it both sides had to compromise on many things that they held dear. It represents our best effort. Uniquely, it has the democratic endorsement of the people of the island, North and South, voting together for the first time since the country was partitioned. Its implementation is, therefore, a democratic imperative.

And we have gone a long way towards that end. We have an Assembly elected in a proportionate way with mechanisms in place to protects all sides and to ensure that cross-community support is required when important decisions are to be taken.

All necessary legislative provisions are in place to allow the Ministerial Council, bringing together Ministers from North and South, and Implementation Bodies to come into being so that we work the common ground in areas of mutual benefit.

We have reviews into the future of policing and the criminal justice system underway. A Human Rights Commission has been established in the North and its counterpart will soon come into being in the South.

Most importantly, perhaps, our people are beginning to learn to live with peace and to dare to look to the future with hope.

And none of this would have been possible, in my view, without the sustained support and encouragement from our friends throughout the world, but most especially in the United States. We deeply appreciate it more than I can say.

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President Clinton has been the best friend to Ireland that we could possibly have wished for. His commitment to the peace process has been of critical importance and we are greatly in his debt.

He also sent us that great but modest man Senator George Mitchell - a man of great wisdom and a rock of strength throughout. When many others would have despaired, he persevered. The greatest tribute that he paid to those that gathered around the table in Belfast was his belief in us and in the possibility that we could together reach agreement.

As I have said, what we have achieved to date is immense.

But one piece of the jigsaw remains to be inserted - one piece, but a crucial piece, the formation of an inclusive executive so that the people of Northern Ireland can properly take control over their destiny into their own hands.

The issue at the centre of our present difficulties is, of course, one of trust. Unionists need to be able to trust that Republicans are fully committed to the path of peace. Republicans need to trust that when Unionists say that there can be no going back to the way things were in the past that they are being sincere. It is only in placing our trust in each other that we will be able to find a way forward together.

But we have come a long, long way since we first set out on this process. We have achieved too much, far too much, for us to so much as contemplate the possibility that our endeavour might fail.

An Ireland at peace with itself is within our grasp if we can only reach out to take it. That is the historic challenge we now face.

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