

Irish problem is European in its origins — Hume

OPINION

The SDLP leader, **John Hume**, gives his reasons for supporting a 'Yes' vote

MY reasons for urging a massive "Yes" vote for European political union are very clear and I have stated them often. Fifty years ago today, for the second time in half a century millions of people lay slaughtered right across Europe and cities were devastated. Differences had once again, as they had been for centuries, pushed to the point of division. Human beings, and of course human life, were once again the victims. Once again nationality was more important than humanity.

If someone had declared that in another half century, which is a very brief time in the history of a country, let alone a continent, we would be in a United Europe and the Germans, French, English etc, would still retain their identity in that Europe, that someone would at best have been dismissed as a dreamer. Yet it has happened and, if for no other reason than that, it has ended the conflict of centuries, it is deserving of total support. Humanity transcends nationality.

It is also interesting to look at the voices that are strongly opposing European Union and the Maastricht Treaty. I noted in the British Parliament that they were all voices of 19th-century nationalism. The opponents on the continent are similar, the Front National in France and emerging neo-Nazi forces in Germany and elsewhere. History will not be too kind to 19th-century nationalism. It created not just two world wars but imperialism as well, and humanity has paid and is paying a terrible price.

In Denmark the "No" vote was achieved by a combination of extreme opposites from the far right and far left. No one should be surprised. The essence of extreme mentalities, whether political or religious, is their self-righteousness and their refusal to recognise the obvious in this world. There is no perfection. There never will be. The task of humanity is to keep improving. The negative mentality never leads people forward because it is always telling people self-righteously what is wrong and what it is against. They play on people's fears. The bottle is always half empty. It is never half full. Fundamentally it represents the lack of moral courage and a purist pretence, an attitude that will never provide leadership.

There is no shortage of such a mentality in Ireland, and a referendum on a complex issue gives it the opportunity to emerge. Referenda are at their most democratic when they are on clear single issues. When they are about complex matters, the public and democracy are best served by paying attention to all the forces in a democratic society who are responsible to them and whose job is to consider the matters in question in great detail — Government, Opposition, trade unions, industrial, business and farming communities. In Ireland they have all urged "Yes" to European union and they are right. What they are not saying is that Maastricht is totally perfect, but it is a steady and positive step in the revolutionary process of a united Europe. One would have thought that every human being would want to move not only towards a united Europe, but towards a united world!

The "No" lobby in Ireland tends to try to use the referendum as a single issue rather than the complex agreement which it is. The abortion issue is a prime example. The opposite sides on this issue both want a "No". Identity is another issue. It is too threatened, they say. They don't seem to have much confidence in their identity. I don't think a Cork man is any less a Cork man because he's Irish. I don't think he is any less Irish because he is European. Do they?

In politics the "No" lobby is equally confusing. Who are they? Ian Paisley, Sinn Féin and the party which now calls itself the Democratic Left.

On to more serious matters. Leaving aside the overwhelming economic reasons for a "Yes" vote which are self-evident in today's smaller world, I would like to deal with how the evolution towards European unity came about and its implications for conflict resolution everywhere, especially on our own island. The founders of the new Europe deemed that difference

was no longer a threat, that humanity is richer for its difference and diversity, that we are human beings before we are anything else — British, Irish, French, German, black, white, Arab, Israeli, Serb, Croat etc — and that it is an accident of birth what and where we are born, and difference should never therefore be a source of hatred or conflict, let alone war. The institutions that were set up were institutions that respected difference and diversity but allowed the peoples of Europe to work their common ground together — economics — to spill their sweat and not their blood, and to grow together at their own speed into a new Europe the essence of whose unity is based on the acceptance of diversity. That evolution continues.

All of this has implications for our own problem here in Ireland. European union and the Single Market have changed the roots and nature of our problem. The Irish problem is European in its origins. In centuries prior to the Act of Union, the Irish had very strong links with the rest of Europe. It was English fear of those links that led to the colonisation of Ireland and what has become known as the British presence. The plantation of Ulster was England's response to the links with Spain, the Act of Union was the response to the links with France.

All that has now changed. Both Britain and Ireland have built and are developing new links with those same European countries. The world is a smaller place. Sovereignty and independence issues at the heart of war in Europe and the British-Irish quarrel have changed their meaning. We now have shared sovereignty and interdependence as we move inevitably towards a United States of Europe and as we in Ireland rid ourselves of our obsession with Britain and rebuild our links with the rest of Europe. With our identity of economic and cultural interests with many regions of that Europe we should be looking forward to the next stage of the evolution — the regionalisation of Europe.

The legacy of that past remains — a deeply-divided people. Here again the lessons of Europe plus our common membership of it are forces that will, in the end, resolve our ancient quarrel. Let us respect our differences. Let us build institutions in the North, and between North and South, that not only respect our



Mr John Hume: overwhelming economic reasons for European union.

differences but allow us to work our common ground together, a common economic ground which is considerable in the new Europe, particularly when we become the offshore island.

By so doing, like the peoples of Europe who have settled far

more bitter quarrels than ours, we shall erode the distrust and prejudice and grow together at our own speed into a new Ireland built on respect for diversity. It will not be easy but there is no other road and the forces of European union are all in favour of an Ireland

built on respect for Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. They are also necessary for our economic survival. In today's day and age we simply cannot live apart.

John Hume MP, MEP is leader of the SDLP.