

Hume statement on peace hopes

The Irish Times (1921-Current File); Jan 5, 1994;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and The Weekly Irish Times

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THE FOLLOWING is the text of a statement issued yesterday by Mr John Hume, leader of the SDLP:

When the British/Irish joint declaration was made in December, I made clear that I regarded it as a major step on the road to peace and I asked for it to be considered in detail by all parties before responding. Given the importance of the declaration and its objective, that was not too much to ask. I also recognised that the most important response would be that of the Provisional republican movement and that, given the nature of their organisation, that would take time. I also appealed for an absence of knee-jerk reaction. There has been quite an amount of that, some of it irresponsible and inaccurate. There has also been a lot of insensitive and unhelpful language like "Take it or leave it", "decontamination periods", gauntlets etc. Language of that nature is most unhelpful at a very sensitive and important time, particularly when the objective is to seek an end to all violence and to save human life and bring to an end the terrible tragedies that so many families have suffered.

Language as well from some people who would describe themselves as republicans has not been helpful, since their response has been based on regarding the declaration as a settlement of our problems, which it is not. That will only come at the next stage of the process involving both governments and all parties, hopefully in a totally peaceful atmosphere. What the declaration essentially does, among other things, is address the stated reasons for armed struggle given by the IRA.

The stated reasons by the IRA for armed struggle were that the British were in Ireland defending their own interests by force — economic and strategic interests — and that they were preventing the Irish people from exercising the right to self-determination. I have argued that, while these reasons were historically correct, they are no longer true in today's new Europe. Indeed, following our published dialogue in 1988, in which Sinn Féin spelled out those reasons, reasons to which I drew the attention of the British government and asked them to make clear that they had no longer any selfish economic or strategic interests in Ireland, the then Secretary of State, Peter Brooke, stated that very clearly in a major speech in 1990.

The statement is repeated in the joint declaration, when the Prime Minister "reiterates on behalf of the British government that they have no selfish economic or strategic interest in Northern Ireland. Their primary interest" — which in my view is an acceptable and necessary political interest — "is to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement among all the people who inhabit the island". They go further and underline that they would work together with the Irish Government to achieve such an agreement, an agreement which would naturally have to address all the relationships that go to the heart of the problem.

There remains the question of self-determination. Mr Adams and I agreed in our first joint statement that, while the Irish people as a whole had the right to self-determination, they were divided as to how that right was to be exercised, and it was the search for agreement and the means of reaching such agree-



Mr John Hume, the SDLP leader, with the document released by his party yesterday. Photograph: Martin McCullough/PA

ment on which our dialogue would be concentrating. It is self-evident that the means of reaching such agreement could not possibly be through any form of force, since an agreement by coercion is a clear contradiction in terms, and is in fact impossible. It is implicit in all of that, of course, that agreement should be able to be made freely and without any outside impediment.

I believe that this principle is clearly accepted by the British government when they declare in the joint declaration: "The British government agree that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right to self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, north and south, to bring about a united Ireland if that is their wish". To underline that commitment to self-determination by agreement among our divided people they "reaffirm as a binding obligation that they will, for their part, introduce the necessary legislation to give effect to this" (i.e. a united Ireland) "or, equally, to any measure of agreement on future relationships in Ireland which the people living in Ireland may themselves freely so determine without external impediment".

In addition, the British government, while not using the word persuade, commit themselves to

"encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of such agreement over a period through a process of dialogue and co-operation based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland".

None of that is to suggest that the problem has been solved. It does underline that, while past reasons given by the republican movement for armed struggle no longer exist, the legacy of that past which remains, and which is today's problem, is the divided people of our island. It is clear that that problem cannot be resolved by force and it underlines and confirms the need for the second main request of Sinn Féin, put repeatedly in statements and speeches, to the Irish Government and the SDLP, for an organised political alternative to tackle the problem. That alternative has been clearly offered by the Taoiseach in his offer of a permanent Forum for Peace and Reconciliation to face up to the challenges that face us if we are to peacefully resolve the problem of our divided people in a manner that threatens no section of our island people.

The challenge that now faces all of us is a clear political challenge — how to heal the deep divisions among the people of Ireland, divisions which have political, social and, above all, economic implications, particularly for the areas of

high unemployment within the North and the Border counties.

There can be no doubt of the powerful impact that such an institution would have. Given that there would be permanent Northern representation together with the South for the first time since 1920, that representation would ensure that all problems would be consistently and positively addressed. It would have a powerful social and economic impact which, at the end of the day, is what all politics should be about. Wrapping the flag around our young people and pride in our Irishness is not of much value if at the end of the day those young people have to earn their living in another land or spend their lives in dole queues in our own. In meeting this challenge we will be working together not only to harness the positive energies and talents of all our people, but to harness as well the powerful international goodwill that arises from the fact that we are the biggest wandering people in the world — a strength that we have never harnessed.

There are also many other powerful forces in our favour. With peace, the Border will in fact be gone. There will be free movement of goods, people and services throughout Ireland in the new Europe without land borders. The British army checkpoints are

the only remaining signs of a border anywhere in the new Europe, and they will disappear with peace, and natural social and economic activity will resume for the first time in 70 years, particularly in the Border regions. Indeed, research carried out by business leaders, some from the unionist tradition, has already indicated that the development to the full of the economic potential of internal free trading within Ireland as a whole will create 75,000 jobs.

I have not mentioned, of course, the powerful and special assistance that will come from our friends throughout Europe as well — as has already been indicated by present European leaders. Let us not forget that our problems with Britain were European in origin. Ireland historically has always had positive and powerful links with Europe — links which were powerfully interrupted to Irish disadvantage by the English presence in Ireland. Indeed, origins of our present Northern problem, the Plantation of Ulster, was England's response to our links with Spain, and the Act of Union was the response to Irish republican links with France. We are now totally free, particularly if we are organised, to resume and develop our powerful links across Europe for the benefit of all our people and to give hope in particular to our young people.

The other deep problem that we will be facing, a problem that will be powerfully eroded by economic development, is the division in the hearts and minds of our people, Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter. That is the major political problem that we face. It is self-evident that it can only be solved by peaceful means and by a healing process. Partition is not the Irish problem. It simply institutionalised and deepened the existing difference in the hearts and minds of our people that had been there for centuries. It has also made that division worse. Those differences go back even beyond the plantation, because our geography and our special geographical relationship with the neighbouring island were always part of that problem. In the 6th century, St Columba returned from Iona and at the Convention of Drumceatt settled a bitter and bloody quarrel between the clans in Antrim — the Dal Riada — who claimed their loyalty to the King of Argyll — and the clans in Tyrone, Derry and Donegal, whose loyalties were to Irish kings.

Indeed, is it not a deep misunderstanding of the Ulster Protestant tradition that it is only British influence and not their own deeply-felt reasons that up until now have made them want to live apart from the rest of the people of Ireland, reasons that go back beyond partition, as indeed the founder of Irish republicanism, Wolfe Tone, underlined when he spoke of the need to unite Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter, implicitly admitting that they were divided? Indeed, although some of them might find it offensive to speak of their siege mentality, there is no doubt that it dominates their political thinking and attitudes. Although today they are not colonists nor settlers, like the rest of us their heritage and attitudes come down from a past for which they are not responsible, and there is a strong settler element in the deep-seated fear of revenge which underlines the siege mentality.

That aspect of their heritage makes it even more important that physical force is in no way used against them, or to bring about change, since it only rein-

forces the siege mentality and justifies the fear of revenge mentality and, in the end, deepens our division. Indeed, it underlines even more the necessity to recognise that the unionist people are just as much victims of our past as we are, and strengthens the challenge to all of us to show that we mean what we say when we talk of an Ireland that will respect the democratic dignity and civil rights of both communities. It strengthens the need for the forum to do all in its power to remove that distrust factor. Indeed, that is the heart of the Irish problem, and it can only be resolved peacefully and by a healing process.

Indeed, I believe that in a peaceful atmosphere there will also be powerful forces in both sections of our divided people that will work positively towards that healing process. Indeed, I hope that initial suggestions from loyalist paramilitary and political sources that they will set up their own forum are true. We can then, with our two forums, commit ourselves, in the true Presbyterian tradition, to building a Covenant of Honour between our different traditions that will lay the foundations for a true healing process. Let us not forget that the basic philosophy of Presbyterianism — respect for the individual and his or her opinions and respect for diversity — is the basic philosophy that founded genuine republicanism not just in Ireland, but in writing the American Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution, which was the beginning of the end of imperialism.

The challenge that we now face is — by observing and implementing the same principles — to remove the last remaining legacy of imperialism in Europe, the deep divisions among our island people, and to do so in a manner that respects our basic humanity and our basic diversity. It is an enormous challenge and it is a major challenge to all of us. It is a challenge that, as I have said publicly, will require from the republican movement, given the experience that its members have been through, one of the greatest acts of moral courage of this century. But at the end of the day it is moral courage that gives real leadership and that creates truly historic opportunity.

Put more simply and directly, if we look forward to the next 25 years and compare 25 years of armed struggle, with its cost and effect, to 25 years of committed peaceful and organised activity, harnessing all the energies of our people to face up to our problems and to consistently promote and develop the healing process, should there be any doubt about the choice? Let us also respect the right of the Irish people to self-determine their methods.

As we face the 21st century surely the time has come to leave the past behind us. Our present has been created by that past and it is not all that pleasant, and indeed most of our politics, all of it, in the end negative, has been about the wrongs committed by the other side. The time has come to leave it behind and to look to the future, so that the next century will be the first in our island history that has not been scarred by the gun and the bomb, and in which we will have at last created an island where institutions have the allegiance of all our traditions and respect our diversity, so that together we can use all our energies to build a new Ireland in the new Europe of which we are already a part. Let us commit ourselves to spilling our sweat and not our blood.