
John Hume - Northern Ireland

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John Hume, former seminarian, MP, and Leader of the Social Democratic Labour Party in Northern Ireland has been working all his adult life towards bringing his countrymen together. In spite of constant setbacks in his quest for peace he spoke optimistically from his home in Derry about his hopes for the future.

Transcript

Byrne: John Hume, welcome back to Foreign Correspondent, good to see you again. Two years ago it all looked so close, and yet peace still seems so very far away, I wonder just on a personal level, how do you feel watching this process unravel?

Hume: Well, obviously I'm very happy at the progress we've made, because we've made enormous progress. And of course the most important and historic thing is that for the first time in our history the people of Ireland - north and south - have spoken as to how they wish to share this peace of earth together, and overwhelmingly voted....

Byrne: But John Hume, this optimism simply highlights the distress and the despair that many feel about the fact that two years after voting overwhelmingly, the agreement has effectively been suspended, there is no assembly... I mean, you can put a good gloss on it, but these are not happy days.

Hume: No, I'm not putting a gloss on it, I'm saying that we have made a lot of progress. Yes, we have a setback at the moment, but that setback doesn't remove the progress that we've made. We have peace in our streets which has transformed the atmosphere, but obviously I regret very much the current impasse and we're working at the moment to try and resolve it because it's what the vast majority of our people want, and it's the duty of every democrat here to implement the will of the people.

Byrne: Gerry Adams has said that the Agreement is in tatters, why are you so optimistic?

Hume: Well I'm not being optimistic, I'm being positive. When you've been through what we've been through in Northern Ireland it's very easy to be negative. In fact I've said to some politicians that if you took the word 'no' out of the English language they would be speechless. It's very easy to be negative - and if you're negative you never go anywhere, so it's better... if you go on the positive and build on the positive you make progress. And the positive is the progress that we've made to date... we now have a setback, a difficulty on the question of de-commissioning. It's a difficult issue. It's an issue I think that is a distraction because paramilitary organisations can de-commission their guns on Monday and secretly re-commission and get more guns on Tuesday. What is far more important than de-commissioning is that when they say that they have stopped that they are telling the truth - that's what's really important.

Byrne: The fear of course, is that in the political vacuum created by the suspension

of the Agreement, the hard men will return to the streets. Do you think that is a real risk?

Hume: There are risks of every description. I believe it's the duty of public representatives to be positive at all times. If we all start complaining and start saying Oh, there's going to be this going to happen, and that going to happen, all you do is create the atmosphere to make it easier for it to happen.

Byrne: Does it sometimes seem to you a bit like - this whole peace process - like a giant game of chicken? The antagonists push to the brink on every issue, it's always an eleventh hour concession.

Hume: Well, I don't get into language like that, because when you're in a divided society and you're working to build trust, you don't call names at people - you talk to them directly and you listen to them. And as I believe from my experience over the years here, dialogue is the way forward.

Byrne: There's been a lot of blame laid at the door of various politicians, but really I'd like to ask you was the Good Friday Agreement itself ever achievable?

Hume: Well, the Good Friday Agreement is a very clear agreement, and the principles at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement are the principles of peace for any area of conflict in the world when you look at it. The principles are very clear... number one, respect for difference - because all conflict, no matter where it is in the world is about the same thing - it's about difference. Whether your difference is your religion or your nationality or your race, and the answer to difference is to respect it, not to fight about it. The second is then to build institutions, democratic institutions which respect that difference. And that's what they've done in the Good Friday Agreement... they're suspended, but we want to get them back in place. And then the third and most important principle is that they work together from the different sides - that they work together on their common ground... spill their sweat and not their blood. And that's the real healing process, because that will break down... by working together we will break down the barriers of distrust and prejudice of the past and a new society will evolve in a generation or two.

Byrne: John Hume, I hope you have a successful mission to Washington. Thank you for joining us.

Hume: Thank you very much for having me.