

Hume, John. (2000). 'Moving into a New Europe', statement by John Hume, MP, MEP, then SDLP leader, (4 July 2000), [PDF; 80KB]. Derry: SDLP. ... [24119] - [Statement]

MOVING INTO A NEW EUROPE BY JOHN HUME

The European Parliament's decision to strengthen health warnings on tobacco products has focused attention on the influence that the Parliament now enjoys. Not only did this decision show the parliament to be acting in a concerted and united voice, but legislative decisions taken in Strasbourg are now seen to have a direct impact on the lives of ordinary people. Tobacco suddenly is a European issue, and smokers and tobacco manufacturers are taking note.

Whether you are an ardent supporter of European Union or one of its most cynical of critics, all too often the Parliament's decisions on matters that effect our every-day lives, such as the environment, health and safety, employment initiatives, education or food safety are ignored by local media. Whether this stems from a lack of interest in the process, an unwillingness to report on the wider political scene, or a belief that European issues are somehow removed from the general political landscape is open to question.

Or is legislation on a European agenda too remote? Possibly the Parliament has never been perceived as having any great weight or political leverage? That is no longer the case. What is now certain is that the Parliament's role and the issues on which it can legislate is immense. Along with the other European institutions it is making a difference. As the most democratic of these institutions the Parliament will in the future make an even greater difference.

In Ireland, North and South, we have been developing a very strong appreciation of what membership of the European Union means. The European Union has generally been viewed as a positive, constructive force in our society. The framework on which the Union was created has been mirrored in our own local political institutions. Support for the peace process both in political and monetary terms has been immense. Indeed, the Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, originally viewed as a five-year programme, has just been extended to 2004. This is all positive.

Recently, however, some concerns have been raised on the quality of programmes that receive European funding. UTV's Insight Programme highlighted some of the problems that have arisen in the application of funds. Every public expenditure programme has its difficulties. The point is to minimise, detect and remove problems, which we are doing.

Yet Europe, and the role we play in it, is wider than the issue of money and grants. The present round of structural funds, coupled with the Peace II package, constitutes our last major round of grant aid. In future, funding will aid the economies of our neighbours in Poland, The Czech Republic, Slovenia and Hungary as they strive to enjoy the benefits of the single market. The part that we play in the Union will have to respect this new environment.

In this fresh political landscape, we must think about how we can maximise the benefits of EU membership and our duty to enhance our contribution to the development of the European Union. Our role within the Union is changing and a new European mind-set is required. Since the creation of the Scottish Parliament, Scotland's representation in Brussels has increased dramatically. The Scotland Europa office in Brussels now acts as a direct channel into the European legislative process acting as a positive voice for Scotland at the heart of Europe. The same has been mirrored for regions such as Catalonia, Bavaria, and Wales.

Whilst expansion of the Union may be the current political goal, this Europe of the nations is also developing into a Europe of the regions. Northern Ireland has to be ready to play its part in this process.

The European Parliament elections, last held in June 1999, returned a Parliament with extensive new legislative powers. For the first time, the Parliament has the ability to legislate jointly with the Council

of Ministers on issues relating to the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of nationality, freedom of movement and residence of citizens, rights of third country nationals, transport, social policy, employment, equal opportunities, public health and visa policies. These new powers, coupled with power to legislate in the creation of the single market, research and technological development, the environment, consumer protection, education and culture have created a political institution that has real bite.

The Parliament's influence and role is without question. If you couple this with regional representation, the role that we play in Europe takes on new shape and force.

We need to look at the best practice in Europe. We need to ensure that MEPs, NI Ministers and the Assembly work together. Along with local government, business, unions, the farming organisations, the Peace and Reconciliation Partnership Boards and the voluntary sector to ensure that we act coherently and proactively within the EU. We have achieved a great deal in Europe. We now have to ensure that Northern Ireland will be among the leading regions in a European Union stretching from Strabane to Slovenia.

4 July 2000