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Speech by John Hume MP MEP

“The European Union as an instrument of peace in Northern

Ireland”

University of Bergen, Norway

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May I begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the University of Bergen for the kind invitation to speak along with my friend and fellow laureate, David Trimble, at today's event.

It is a great honour to be a part of the celebrations of the centenary of the Nobel Peace Prize, to stand shoulder to shoulder with people who cherish peace. It is truly inspirational to be in Norway for this wonderful occasion, which will serve as a timely reminder of the value of true peace and freedom, not just for those of us here today, but for people all around the world as well.

As I stand here this afternoon, I cast my mind back to 10th December 1998, when the names of David Trimble and John Hume were added

to the roll call of honour as we were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

We share in that great honour with many, many great people and organisations. One such person who has consistently promoted justice through peace is Aung San Suu Kyi. Hers is a rock solid example that accentuates my belief that while one man or woman can try to make a difference, every man and woman should try.

Aung San Suu Kyi has courageously and consistently displayed the leadership and vision that has brought her people to their feet in support of the principles of justice, democracy and peace.

Today, I ask to entire democratic world - all of us who believe in justice and freedom - to support the campaign of Bishop Desmond Tutu and stand up for the principles we all hold dear by supporting for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and the establishment of democratic government in Burma.

I said it then and I say it again now that when David Trimble and

myself were awarded the Nobel Prize it was not just in recognition of the contribution made by two individuals, any of the parties or any of the participants in the political process.

It was in recognition of an entire community, an entire generation and more, that had suffered so greatly and so tragically for three decades and yet still had the energy, the conviction and the vision to reach out and grasp the true prize of real and lasting peace in our country.

When the people of Ireland, North and South, voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Good Friday Agreement, we were stating clearly our intention to walk a new path, no matter how difficult we understood that path would be.

And that is what is happening today in Northern Ireland. As we stand at the beginning of the twenty first century, we are turning the corner of history and walking a new path of politics, partnership and social justice for all. Behind us lies a great deal of pain, anguish and despair. There have been deep difficulties over recent years, but none of us

ever thought it would be easy to fully implement the Agreement.

Equally, we all know that ahead of us lies hope, opportunity and the untold potential for a new agreed Ireland and that is something the value of which people from all backgrounds appreciate and want to see fulfilled.

In moving forward, we must never lose sight of the suffering the people of Northern Ireland have endured. Each gravestone, each broken heart, each shattered home should serve as a chilling reminder of the futility and the brutality of thirty years of violence against a backdrop of despair and political inertia. Each lost life should provide us all with the determination to keep working for peace. We owe it to those who lost their lives and to their families to ensure that the latter half of the twentieth century will be the last era in Irish history to be hall marked by violence.

There can be no more powerful a catalyst for building true and lasting peace in Northern Ireland than our own recent history. And it is the people's will that we do indeed achieve true peace for this time and for

all time.

As I said in my Nobel acceptance speech:

“Amid shattered lives, a quiet heroism has borne silent rebuke to the evil that violence represents, to the carnage and waste of violence, to its utter futility.”

What we can do now in Ireland, what we must do, is ensure that we leave violence behind for good and make sure our young people can grow up in a society that is free and democratic and economically prosperous. That is the job of each and every one of us for the years ahead. To fulfil the untold promise of the Good Friday Agreement and build the new Ireland. An Ireland that is ready for the challenges of a changing, evolving and expanding Europe.

It is important to reiterate today that in spite of the setbacks and difficulties, there has been huge progress in Northern Ireland since Christmas 1998. As the parties work to build peace on the foundations

of the Good Friday Agreement, to change for better and forever the nature of Irish politics, we have made strides forward that many may have thought impossible.

Today we have an inclusive Executive that is functioning very well, with all shades of opinion in the North involved in the decision-making process. With David Trimble as First Minister and the new leader of my party, Mark Durkan, as Deputy First Minister, the lynchpin institution of the Good Friday Agreement, the Assembly, is now addressing the day to day issues facing our community. Together we are getting on with the job of real politics, of tackling unemployment and all the other issues that face our people in their day to day lives.

Last week the North- South Ministerial Council and the British- Irish Council met again in Dublin. The Agreement is working. It is delivering real and meaningful change.

It is clear that the will of the people, Nationalist and Unionist alike, is to move forward, to embrace the politics of equality and opportunity and to fulfil the promise of the Good Friday Agreement.

There has been so much progress to date. And yet the reality is we have only just begun. There is a long road ahead. But we are committed to travelling it. There will be no going back.

And it is imperative that we keep moving forward, given the changing nature of our community, our country and the wider Europe. By working in partnership, Unionist and Nationalist, we are setting a precedent for a much better future for all. We are giving our people the confidence in themselves to fully embrace the new multi-cultural Ireland for the Europe of the twenty-first century. In doing so, we can also provide other countries (other areas of conflict) with hope. But even more we can provide the world with a tangible blueprint for conflict resolution.

The Good Friday Agreement and the political process in Northern Ireland has potential beyond the shores of Ireland. It is also the framework for conflict resolution for anywhere in the world. And its basis is in the framework and ethos of the European Union.

The values of partnership, equality, tolerance, respect for difference and inclusion are the values that provided the inspiration for our Agreement in Northern Ireland. They are the values of the European Union and they are values that will be central to the resolution of conflict anywhere in the world.

In this century the challenge for us all is the acceptance and promotion of ethnic diversity and we in Northern Ireland understand that we can lead the way.

The history of Ireland tells us of the indignity and injustice poured upon those who left our shores in search of a better world. We suffered greatly at the hands of intolerant people. We know all too well of racial hatred and ignorance.

For that very reason I believe it is essential that Ireland now rises to the challenge of tolerance and inclusion. Now that our country is the destination for immigrants from across the world, from places such as

Eastern Europe, we must take a principled stand for a caring and compassionate society.

The European Union is a wonderful example of the power of harnessing the potential of diversity of working with each other in the interests of all people. As the EU itself undergoes fundamental change through enlargement, it is essential that the defining principles of the EU are protected. The basic equality of all Europeans, respect for difference and the inclusion of all sections of opinion in the decision-making process are the foundations of the EU. We must and we will safeguard those principles as we develop the Europe of the Regions.

I want to live in an Ireland and a Europe of opportunity that look after the weak and the vulnerable. The European Union has been central to economy of Northern Ireland. Tackling poverty has been at the top of the EU agenda for a very long time.

The right to work is fundamental. The right to feed and clothe your family and to live in a decent home is something no one should be

expected to do without. Yet there are young parents and families throughout our society and across Europe who struggle who get by.

The party I represent, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, is the only major party in Northern Ireland in favour of European Union. We take this view for a number of reasons, not least but not just because Northern Ireland has benefited greatly from membership of the European Union.

The evidence of the material benefits of EU membership is all around us in Northern Ireland, as I have already articulated. In addition, the development of our transport infrastructure, much of it supported by the European Union, is obvious. Less obvious are the improvements in telecommunications, energy supplies and even in water supply financed by the European Union.

So many of the EU initiatives have been very beneficial for our community. Less Favoured Status for our farmers was crucial, as has been the Common Agricultural Policy.

Since the cease-fires of 1994, Northern Ireland has also received 100 million Euro a year for the Special PEACE programme and will continue to do so until 2004. This initiative is unique in my experience.

Much progress has been made on tackling the high levels of deprivation and marginalisation across Northern Ireland thanks to the European Union. We obtained Objective One status in the late 1980s that has consistently provided us with great benefits through the Structural Funds.

Programmes such as LEADER, INTERREG and EQUAL are helping grass roots communities to develop and rejuvenate.

Our education system benefits from the EU Social Fund as well as from various educational programmes under SOCRATES and LEONARDO.

The EU has been a major contributor to the International Fund for

Ireland, whose role in job creation and urban and rural regeneration has been so important to us in Northern Ireland.

And given the importance of showing our young people the value of open-mindedness, the inspiration of the EU is apparent. The young people of Europe are its best resource and its greatest hope. Our youthful and energetic population has the ability to build community the limits of which are set only at the limits of their own creativity and imagination. I believe firmly in our young people. I believe we must invest fully in our young people. We owe it to them to put our faith in them and I am certain they will not let us down.

And we can be assured that as we move forward, the European Union will be central to our future.

It is clear that the role, both practical and inspirational, played by the European Union as the peace process in Northern Ireland developed to the point at which it stands today has been critical.

My belief in European Union, not alone as a tool for social, economic and cultural change, but also as a philosophy that contains the key to conflict resolution in every corner of the globe is well known.

Europe, by 1945, appeared intractably divided. Its peoples had only just emerged from the second bloody and bitter war of the twentieth century that had left many millions dead.

The principles of respect, tolerance, partnership and the development of common economic interests seemed completely unobtainable. Yet within a few years the understanding that human beings cannot live apart prevailed. We are destined to live and work together.

In 2001, the European Union stands as the most vibrant testimony to the ideal that we are all better working with each other and for each other. Put simply, the European Union is the single most potent symbol of conflict resolution in our history.

The political importance of the European Union is central. It has been

an inspiration to us all in the search for peace in Ireland. The structures of the EU are clearly reflected in our new political institutions. It has helped us to develop the habit of working together within Northern Ireland and between the two parts of the island, as well as transforming relations within these islands. It has helped us to create a more outward looking society.

As I have often said, all conflict is about difference, whether it is in terms of nationality, race or religion. The answer to difference therefore is to respect it, not fight about it. It is an accident of birth and should and never be the source of hatred or conflict and should never be used to justify the use of violence.

Respect for difference is therefore the first principle of European Union. It is also the first principle of the Good Friday Agreement because all identities are respected and there is no victory for any side.

The second principle of European Union is the institutions that respect

those differences - a council of ministers, a civil service commission and a parliament drawn from all countries. That principle is also central to the Good Friday Agreement, an assembly and an executive both elected by proportional representation to ensure that all sections of our people are represented and councils of ministers for both Irish and British relationships.

The third principle of European Union is that the representatives of the different countries work together on their common interests, largely economic. That is in effect what I have called the healing process because by working together they have left behind the distrusts and prejudices of the past and the new Europe has evolved. It is still evolving.

That third principle is also the third principle of our Good Friday Agreement and indeed in many ways it is the most important one. As our public representatives work together in our common interests we will erode the distrust and the prejudices of the past and a new Ireland will evolve based on agreement and respect for difference. That is the real solution. It won't happen in a day or a week. It won't happen by

revolution. It will happen by evolution. And it is already happening.

There is indeed a huge imperative today for all the world. We must choose the way of peace and step back from the shadow of war. We must seek out justice and stand up against intolerance. We must make real the promise of conflict resolution and move away from the terrible spiral of violence. We in Northern Ireland have set out on that course. Inspired by the example of the European Union, and underpinned by the will of the people of Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement is going to succeed for this time and for all time.