

Speech by John Hume MP MEP

Tara Circle, Rochester NY

Saturday 9th March, 2002

Understanding our history, Sharing our future

James Joyce once wrote that Irish history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awaken. A nightmare of violence. Of intolerance. Of sectarianism. Of prejudice. Of discrimination. Of injustice. Irish history makes painful reading. The question for those of us in positions of responsibility is what are we prepared to do to emancipate those we represent from that tragic history and shape a new and better future for all.

As the nightmare of the past thirty years and more in Northern Ireland draws to its conclusion, the challenge for all our people is to learn the lessons of the past and break free from the grave cycle of violence and despair that has caused so much suffering in our community.

We must try to arrive not just at a point of understanding of each other's view, but also at a point of appreciation of the pain we have all caused each other over many years. That search for truth will not be easy. It will challenge and ask difficult questions of us all. But Bishop Desmond Tutu was right when he said that we must learn lessons from the mistakes of the past or be destined to repeat them.

For this reason, I believe it is important that I outline for you this morning my thoughts on the historical context of the conflict in Northern Ireland. This is perhaps an appropriate moment to reflect on our recent history in the last century and to try to identify the challenges for the new one. Although it is important that we leave our tragic past behind us, it is important too that we see where it is we have come from as we map out for the paths to follow in the future. The purpose of this

retrospective analysis is to allow us be prospective with clarity, vision and understanding.

By 1970, it had become apparent that a new political party with new ideas was necessary in Northern Ireland. With other like-minded people, I became a founder member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and we determined to be a force for change and a force for good.

Emerging from the civil rights movement of the late sixties, we were a young and enthusiastic political party. We believed in ourselves and in our ability to make a lasting impact on the political landscape in our country.

We took a stand and we changed the world we knew. While others supported war, the SDLP stood resolutely by peace. While others destroyed, the SDLP built. While others held up political progress, the SDLP invested in the political process. While others shifted position, the SDLP stayed true. While others rejected, the SDLP innovated. Today the SDLP is a stronger political force than we have ever been at any time in our history. Our philosophy has become the guiding light of the political process.

We have always believed in diversity as a positive component of any healthy society. After all, no two human beings are the same. Difference is natural and in difference we can find the very essence of our unity.

'E Pluribus Unum', 'From many, One', is the founding principle of the constitution of the United States. Drafted in large part by Irish Presbyterians, this is the fundamental principle upon which we in Ireland must build a new society. It is a principle we have perilously neglected for too long, paying little more than lip service to this big idea. The challenge to us all for the future is whether or not the principle will be both accepted and implemented. Without it there will be no peace

or stability and we will continue to do what we have always done – not to accept difference but to push it to the point of division with all its tragic consequences.

Although we in the SDLP had no illusions about the scope and the magnitude of the job at hand, our purpose was to try and get beyond the sterile conflict between nationalism and unionism within Northern Ireland. In a vacuum of unspeakable violence from both republicans and loyalists, we believed it was necessary to work towards reconciliation within Northern Ireland by focussing on the real social and economic issues that tend to bring people together rather than divide them.

Economic development and job creation, housing, health, education were all issues that existing parties had little interest in at that time. By working on such problems, we hoped to challenge the sectarian divisions in our society and make people on all sides realise that while there is much that divides there is still more that unites.

At the same time, we believed it was important to put Northern Ireland into a much wider context: Anglo-Irish, European and international.

Anglo-Irish, so that the British and Irish governments confronted their responsibilities and worked together to bring about an honourable accommodation within these islands.

European, so that Ireland, North and South, would be part of the emerging united Europe.

International, so that we could draw on the support and influence of the Irish diaspora in North America and elsewhere- something that has been extremely effective and important as I will illustrate later.

Above all, we wanted to build an Ireland free from sectarian division, bringing our society into the European mainstream and creating an economy capable of

providing decent jobs and living conditions for all our people, irrespective of politics or religion.

The key concept in our thinking was the need for an Ireland based in agreement, ordered by human rights and driven forward by equality. Essentially this meant that we needed to find a political agreement that would allow unionists and nationalists to find a way to share the island of Ireland with the identities of all intact. We knew we had to create a new political dispensation in which the rights and aspirations of all would be respected.

Much to our own frustration, and at much cost to the community, we had to wait until 1998 and the Good Friday Agreement to see the framework of an agreed Ireland put in place.

It is a terrible tragedy that so many lives were lost in a conflict the awful brutality of which was matched only by its utter futility. The deep wound of three decades of violence is only now being allowed to heal.

Historians will ultimately have to decide how successful we in the SDLP have been in achieving our aims. But I would like to point a number of factors that any objective analysis of our success or failure will have to take into account.

Through participation in the political system at all levels, we have put Northern Ireland on the political map. In Westminster, in Strasbourg, in Washington, we have been consistently constructive. We have been the engineers and drivers of positive political ideas and innovation in Northern Ireland for three decades and more.

We pioneered the concept of power sharing in local government, which is now the normality and is actually at the centre of the Good Friday Agreement. Due in large part to our contacts, we have gained political and material support from the

European Union and the United States in bringing about an end to conflict. Our ideological influence on the substance of the Good Friday Agreement is self-evident.

In dealing with the problem in Northern Ireland throughout the past thirty-two years, we in the SDLP have been totally consistent:

Consistent in our total opposition to violence, in the face of intimidation and castigation over many years from some who have since seen that violence is wrong, immoral and counter-productive.

Consistent in our support of partnership and equality, in the face of discrimination and injustice over many years from some who now participate in the working of the partnership administration established under the Agreement.

Consistent in our advocacy of the consent principle, in the face of vilification and attack over many years from some who have only recently come to agree with that principle.

In reality, we in the SDLP have stood consistent, neither bending with the wind nor breaking with the waves. The only vindication we sought, for we never sought victory, was the vindication of agreement among our people and lasting peace in our country.

We argued that there were two mindsets, both of which had to change. The Unionist and Nationalist mindsets.

The Unionists wished to protect their identity and their ethos and we had no quarrel with that. Not only did they have every right to protect their identity, it is absolutely essential in attempting to resolve our problem that the Unionist identity is fully

protected and respected. No conflict resolution process that seeks to undermine or devalue the rights and identities of others will ever succeed. Trust and respect can never be built upon underhand practices designed for short-term political gain. Honesty and integrity are essential and we in the SDLP always had the integrity to try to reassure unionists that we are honest in our attempts to find an accommodation that would underline, not undermine, their sense of identity.

Rather we argued against the methods used by Unionism in trying to protect its identity and rights. It was the way in which they unashamedly held all power in their own hands for so many years, using whatever means possible to keep grip on their control. The system in the old Northern Ireland, under the old Stormont regime, was to exclude anyone who was not a unionist. This, of course, led to widespread discrimination in jobs, housing and voting rights.

Our challenge to Unionism was to recognise that because of their geography and their numbers the conflict in Northern Ireland could never be resolved without them and any solution required their participation and endorsement. Therefore, we called on them to come to the negotiating table and reach an agreement that would fully uphold their identity. They did this on Good Friday 1998.

One of the principle responsibilities of leadership is to challenge one's own thinking as well as the thinking of others. To this end, we in the SDLP knew that the Nationalist mindset, the mindset of many of the people we represent, had to change as well.

The SDLP's challenge to that mindset was that it was people who have rights, not territory and that without people any piece of earth is only a jungle. We argued that it was the people of Ireland who were divided, not the territory and therefore agreement among the people was the only solution. The natural logic of our challenge to the nationalist mindset was that given that our people were divided,

violence could play no role in bringing them together. Violence could – and tragically did - serve only to drive our people further apart. The line on the map is only a symptom of the much deeper border in the hearts and minds of people.

Therefore, the changes we argued for in both mindsets would fulfil the same objective of agreement. In preparation for such an agreement, there had to be a clear definition of the problem that needed to be resolved. Again, the SDLP was consistent throughout the troubles. Therefore, our analysis of the problem and our strategy for resolving it remained consistent.

We argued that any solution would centre around three sets of relationships – relations within Northern Ireland, relations within the broader island of Ireland and relations between Britain and Ireland. The logic of our position was that in any talks aimed at reaching agreement, those three sets of relationships should be central to the negotiating framework and both the Irish and British governments should be involved as well as the parties in the North.

Nowadays, it is taken for granted that the two governments work together. But it took a considerable number of years to bring that about because, for many years, successive British Governments refused to engage in dialogue about Northern Ireland with the Irish Government, given their argument that Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom.

In our approach to getting the two governments working together our contacts ~~in~~ in America were very valuable, as I said earlier. Indeed, Senators Kennedy and Moynihan, Speaker Tip O'Neill and Governor Hugh Carey –the four horsemen – persuaded President Carter to make the first ever statement by an American President on Northern Ireland. In this statement, President Carter called on the two governments to work together towards solving the conflict in Northern Ireland and guaranteed economic support from the US were this to happen.

Given that the SDLP analysis of the problem centred around the three sets of relationships, it was logical for us to vigorously pursue such a strategy and indeed, we published a policy document in April 1981 which is greatly reflected in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was, in my opinion, the first major step in our peace process. Article One of the Agreement underlined its significance:

- (a) "The two governments affirm that any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland;
- (b) Recognise that the present wish of a majority of people of Northern Ireland is for no change in the status of Northern Ireland;
- (c) Declare that, if in future a majority of the people of Northern Ireland clearly wish for and formally consent to the establishment of a united Ireland, they will introduce and support in the respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish;"

It was very significant that the Irish Government was accepting the principle of consent, which Sinn Fein has only come to accept very recently, having spent years rubbishing the idea. When the SDLP was formed, we made clear in our constitution that we would be seeking the unity of the people of Ireland through agreement and consent. This is a principle that was very central to our consistent strategy and is now accepted by the whole of nationalist Ireland.

We in the SDLP also proposed that with any agreement reached, the last word would have to be left with the people of Ireland and not with the politicians. We proposed joint referendum. The vast majority of the people of Ireland, North and

South, have consented to the Good Friday Agreement, which gives the Agreement a mandate that transcends either Unionism or Nationalism.

From our point of view at the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, what was crucial was article 1c, pursuing unity by consent, which we in the SDLP worked towards. In discussions with the Thatcher government, we made the point that the consistent position of the British Government had been that Northern Ireland was an integral part of the UK because a majority so wished. We asked Margaret Thatcher what would be the case if a majority wished for Irish unity. Would the British Government agree to it?

I put forward this question to deal with the traditional reason for violence given by the IRA – that the British were in Ireland defending their economic and strategic interests by force and therefore the Irish had the right to use force to put them out. In welcoming the Anglo-Irish Agreement, I pointed out that the British Government now had declared their neutrality on the future of Northern Ireland, that Irish unity was therefore a matter for those who wanted it to persuade those who did not. The traditional – and if I may say so spurious and dangerous – reason given by the IRA for the use of violence had been removed.

My statement on the neutrality and call for an end to violence led, some time later to a request for a meeting with Sinn Féin and it led to the talks with Gerry Adams. As I said, the traditional justification given by the IRA for the use of violence was that the British were in Ireland defending their own interests by force and they were preventing the Irish people from exercising the right to self-determination. My response in talks was that while the Irish people should have the right to self-determination, they were divided on how to exercise that right. If the Irish people are defined as all people who live on the island, violence or physical force was not a solution. In fact, this was an obvious contradiction, given that violence could only

deepen the divisions. Agreement, I argued time and time again, was the necessary and only solution.

Regarding the other reason used by Sinn Fein to justify violence, I argued that the British did not have any economic or strategic reason for being in Ireland. Basically, as the dialogue between Sinn Fein and myself took place, I was asked to prove those points as it would lead to a cease-fire.

My response, in agreement with Gerry Adams, was to get a declaration from both governments making these points. Such a declaration would lead to an end to violence followed by all party talks with both governments, whose objective would be to reach an agreement that would enjoy the allegiance of the entire community.

I kept both the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey and the Prime Minister, who was by now John Major, privately informed of my talks with Gerry Adams. I worked for a considerable period of time to agree a proposed joint statement to be put to both governments. I was in constant contact with the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, until we finally reached an agreement on a proposed joint declaration. Mr Haughey fully briefed his successor, Albert Reynolds, and together Albert Reynolds and John Major eventually made the Downing Street Declaration, which led to a cease-fire and the talk process that led to the Good Friday Agreement we have today.

And as we meet here today, the political process in Northern Ireland, for so long under terrible pressure, is beginning to work very effectively to the benefit of all our people. Political parties from across the spectrum are working together and working well together. Upon the rock-solid foundations of the Agreement, we are building together a new type of politics. It is the politics of partnership. The politics of equality. The politics of justice. These are better days for Northern Ireland.

Our institutions are working well, led by the symbolic joint office of the First and Deputy First Minister, one the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble and the other the new leader of the SDLP, Mark Durkan.

Sinn Fein and even the Democratic Unionist Party, who claim opposition to the Agreement yet participate in making its institutions work, are also fully involved.

There is the decision-making Executive and Assembly, which reflects the new partnerships in the North of Ireland.

The North-South Ministerial Council, which is developing issues of common interest and concern across the island of Ireland.

The British- Irish Council, which reflects the dynamic new friendships that exist between Britain and Ireland, no longer defined solely by Northern Ireland.

The three sets of relationships analysis proposed many years earlier by the SDLP, is now the fulcrum around which politics is being made work. Accommodation is replacing alienation, partnership is replacing partisanship, government is replacing grievance.

Other essential elements of the Agreement are being advanced too.

We are creating a policing service that, for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland, can enjoy the support and allegiance of all sections of the community. The SDLP is playing its part in making real the promise of the Patten recommendations on the future of policing. Our criminal justice system is being reformed, though much more work is needed.

Notwithstanding this progress, I do not wish to underestimate the magnitude of the job at hand. Building momentum for peace and stability is one thing. Maintaining that momentum is something entirely different. But I believe we are capable. I believe we will stay the course.

We in Ireland must now rise to the challenge of building a strong economy that provides decent jobs and a better standard of life for all, regardless of their politics or background.

We must rise to the challenge of genuine freedom for our children. The freedom to think for themselves and express themselves positively. Freedom from poverty. Freedom from bigotry. Freedom from racism.

We must rise to the challenge of real reconciliation, addressing the concerns of the innocent victims of violence in our community and their families, ensuring that their loved ones' memories will be honoured and respected.

We must rise to the challenge of delivering the best government the North of Ireland has even enjoyed, committed to radically improving the public services on which our people rely.

We must rise to the challenge of making real the potential of permanent peace, determined to enshrine the human rights and dignity of all our citizens.

All these and more are the challenges that lie ahead for our country. Informed by our tragic history, instilled with real determination and inspired by our collective vision for a better Ireland, I am certain that we can fulfil the promise of the civil rights anthem to which the SDLP began marching over thirty years ago. One day:

"We shall Overcome".