

Opening remarks by John Hume MP MEP
Agreed Ireland Forum - Panel Discussion
"The Art of Politics"
Beaconsfield Gallery, Vauxhall, London 2003

May I commence my remarks by thanking Martin Collins, Kevin McNamara and everyone involved with the Agreed Ireland Forum for inviting me to participate in this panel discussion this evening and you Anni for chairing this session. I should also like to congratulate Shane Cullen on the achievement of his inspiring and commendable sculptural work, 'The Agreement'.

At a time when the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is yet again encountering difficulties, it serves as a useful pointer for us all as to what our duty is with regards to seeing that agreement faithfully put into practice in all its aspects. It was voted for by the overwhelming majority of people both within Northern Ireland and in Ireland as a whole. That mandate should be respected and honoured.

For all of us who believe in that Agreement, there are grounds at present for frustration, anger and disappointment. We gather here, in a sense, to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the signing of that document. This should be a time of joy and of celebration. There is no sense of euphoria. It remains a fact that only on one of those anniversaries of that day in 1998 have all of the institutions established by the Agreement been fully functioning. Five years on, this is an intolerable situation.

I, like so many others, have been angered by the inability of certain groups to take the steps necessary to deliver the implementation of the will of the people. Even at this stage, I would call upon those with responsibilities in this regard to live up to them. The referendum in 1998 represented the democratic expression of the will of the people of Ireland, and that mandate must be respected and honoured. While the two governments may, and should, implement those aspects of the Agreement which are in their gift, the people voted for an Assembly, an Executive, a North-South Ministerial Council and all the other institutions in expectation of their being operated on a power-sharing basis. Nobody with the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland at heart wants to see direct rule in place.

Similarly, it is unacceptable that the people are not afforded the opportunity to give their verdict on those charged with the task of delivering on the Agreement. The people have the right to judge all their parties on their performance in securing its implementation. The postponement of elections does not help the implementation of the Agreement. They should be held at the earliest opportunity.

There are added difficulties with the postponement of elections. That is the danger that it will lead to increased apathy and disillusionment. It is always so that when the many withdraw from political and civic participation, extremism and violence is given oxygen. It should be a priority of all of us involved in politics, representatives, activists and voters alike, to encourage continued interest and activity in civic life.

Our will and determination to make progress, in policing, social issues, economic development and other areas should not be diminished. Persistence is a political essential. We should redouble our efforts. We should all remain focused on the achievement of progress, lest we allow our politics to slip into stagnation or inertia.

Nevertheless, while some may be disheartened or dejected at the rate of progress, there is much to celebrate. We need only to cast our minds back to 10 years ago to remember how much we have moved on already. That year, 1993, was the year of the Castlerock killings, of the Shankill Road bombing and of the Greysteel massacre, among many other awful murders and violent acts. That violence, of course, was not restricted to Ireland. This island too suffered, for 1993 was also the year of the Warrington bombing and of the Bishopsgate bomb here in London.

Notwithstanding the ongoing difficulties we are experiencing, we have come so very far in that decade. The people of Britain, just as they suffered as a result of the conflict, have benefited from its transformation. It is most appropriate, then, that groups like the Agreed Ireland Forum, the Beaconsfield Contemporary Art group and others contribute to the ongoing effort to build the peace. For if we ever cease to strive to develop the peace, we will risk losing the benefits that it has brought and that it has yet to bring.

This is perhaps one way in which 'Art' differs from politics. It may be argued that the work of an artist comes to an end at a given point, upon their completion of a work. Once a painting is painted, the

point of completion is reached. The artist has reached that mark considered by Yeats, they have created something that will last beyond their passing.

The context of politics is somewhat different. If one considers the Good Friday Agreement as a 'work', it is clear from our current circumstances that the task of the politician, the activist and the voter continues beyond the completion and signing off of the physical document. Political achievements must be continually reaffirmed, buttressed and built upon. The politician does not have the option of hanging the Agreement on the wall and leaving it to the curiosity of the onlooker. For the great potential of politics is its ability to deliver change. Change, though, depends on people and people must be engaged, convinced and challenged. And change is a never-ending dynamic. It is never enough to say that the work is over, that it has been completed. For there is always more to do.

Notwithstanding this essential difference, that art can have a terminus that can not exist in the process of politics, there are many similarities between art and politics. Just as the artist may work for a commissioning body, or patron, the politician works for the constituent, the community or others. Both work for people. Just as the artist muses over his or her project, as they argue with their associates, as they feel the pressure of a deadline, so too does a politician experience a range of emotions in the course of their work. Just as an artist creates a work through the aggregating of brush strokes or chisel marks, so too does a politician take many small steps in the pursuit of their political project, be it the fixing of a

broken lamppost or negotiation with political leaders. More generally, art can challenge convention, just as progressive politics should challenge the status quo in order to move beyond it. Essentially, both art and politics are both concerned with striving forward, even while it sometimes appears that the opposite is the case.

The art of politics is essentially reliant on one thing: dialogue. Politics is about people communicating with each other. It is by talking to each other that we have moved forward from a morass of violence and suffering to the situation in which we now find ourselves, however unsatisfactory it may be. It is through talking that we can exchange ideas. It is through ideas that we can progress. Where the artist may have a palate, brush or stone, the politician has words and actions. Both the artist and the politician share will and determination. While the will of the artist is rendered in materials, the will of the politician is rendered in words and actions. Indeed, this point has been reinforced by the recent contest over 'words' in our political process. Words are the manifestation of political will.

It is often said that politics is the art of the possible. However, I would tend towards agreement with a noted practitioner of both art and politics, Vaclav Havel, when he argues that politics is in fact the art of the impossible. It is the responsibility of politicians to challenge the boundaries of experience and of expectation. It is not long since many people in Central and Eastern Europe would have seen little hope of liberation from Soviet oppression. Now those states are on the cusp of becoming full members of the European Union. Similarly,

I recall a time when many good people in our country could see no end to the cycle of violence, could see no way out of the nightmare with which we were faced. Just, however, as the people of Prague are now free, the people of Ireland enjoy the dividend of political progress. These improvements were not delivered by bloodshed, by violent revolution or by military might. Indeed, they have come about in spite of the use of the armalite. They have come about because politicians, both in name and not, engaged the philosophy of ideas to overcome seemingly intractable problems. They engaged the art of politics.

There is a message in the success of the 'Velvet Revolution' in Prague and in the progress we have made in the conflict in these islands. Problems are not resolved by violence, merely exacerbated by them. As Martin Luther King said, you can only fight fire with water. When we look around the world, we see the horrific effects of violence in terms of human suffering and in failing to produce real solutions to the problems faced by humankind. Be it in Iraq, the Middle East, central Africa or elsewhere, the use of violence leads to suffering and injustice.

The European Union is the best example of conflict resolution in the world, providing as it has half a century of peace and prosperity in a Europe that was ravaged by two world wars which consigned millions to an early grave. We should be exporting that philosophy of peace, co-operation and respect for difference instead of exporting bombs and soldiers. Difference can best be celebrated by creating institutions which respect and protect that difference.

In a sense, politics is the art of instigating change through the implementation of philosophies. At every stage, those involved in politics should seek to improve things. I am reminded of Carravaggio's work, St. Matthew, in which the subject is looked upon and guided by an angel as he sets about his writing. I would like to think that politicians should always be so guided, and that in our case the angel of the public good should always be close to our hearts and to our minds.

Much has changed about how the contest of politics is conducted since I first stood for election over three decades ago. Political messages are relayed around the world in instants by the media. Polling is carried out to evaluate the view of the electorate on various issues. Spin and focus groups are bywords for political efficacy. Political messages are reduced to soundbytes. Necessary or desirable as all of this may be, they are but the tools of political organisation. The real beauty of politics remains in that view of politics as a means to improve society through the victory of ideas. Spin or soundbytes should never take pre-eminence over ideas, for ideas are the lifeblood of a healthy polity. Spin and soundbytes are valueless indeed without noble ideas behind them.

I should wish to conclude this contribution with the following thoughts. Politics should not be considered as an end in itself. As one of the founding fathers of the European Union, Jean Monnet, mused, it is about laying the foundations of the basis for progress. When those engaged in politics fulfil their roles, there should be no war, no

poverty and no injustice. The art of politics is the interminable effort to provide the fullest degree of those conditions. In that way, It is about providing the environment for human happiness. To provide space for the work of the artist.