

Speech by John Hume MP MEP  
The philosophy of conflict resolution  
Regis University, Denver, Colorado  
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I am deeply grateful to Regis University for conferring this Honorary Doctorate upon me this evening. I am both delighted and humbled to accept it in recognition of my work to help build a better society in Northern Ireland. In doing so I want to offer my sincere thanks to my wife, Pat and to my entire family whose constant, vital support has been deeply appreciated over many challenging years. This recognition is as much in their honour as it is in mine.

Also, I accept this Honorary Doctorate as a gesture of good will and support from this University towards the peace process in Ireland. As such, I accept it on behalf of all the people of Ireland, particularly those in the North of Ireland who have stepped out from underneath the shadow of thirty years of conflict into the daylight of the Good Friday Agreement. Their resilience and courage in the face of deep adversity has sustained the peace process through challenge and difficulty and has set us all on a new and better path through the Agreement. In their name, I am sure we will be able to chart a course through the present difficulties facing the process and implement in full the democratic wish of the people of Ireland.

There is a poem by the acclaimed American poet and author, Maya Angelou, called 'On the pulse of morning'. These poignant lines, taken from it, resonate loudly when one considers the situation in Northern Ireland over the last three decades and more:

“Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need  
For this bright morning dawning for you.  
History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, and if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.”

These are words of real hope. They are words that should inspire us all at this time of great change and challenge for the entire world. They should inspire us never to give up the search for a better world. They should inspire a commitment to end war and suffering. They should inspire us not to indulge revenge, but to embrace the ideal of ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’.

In giving this speech tonight my objective is clear. I want to look forward, to offer a vision for a better Ireland that can positively inform the search for a better world. I want to outline my thoughts as to how we can all fulfil our hopes and dreams, how we can best share a future the limits of which need only be set at the limits of our own energy and imagination.

The pursuit of peace is as honourable as it is essential. I believe that people in positions of responsibility have an awesome duty to lay the foundations for a society in which the victims of a tragic past can fulfil a brighter future. I have always believed that if there is anything any individual can do to prevent the loss of human life in conflict then it is their absolute responsibility to do so.

Central to my entire political philosophy has always been the belief that by making real politics work, by addressing the real issues of employment, housing and healthcare we can change the dynamic of our society. A former President of the United States, Franklin D Roosevelt, once said that

the best social programme is a job. I agree one hundred per cent. One of the great causes and consequences of the troubles in Northern Ireland was the cycle of poverty and despair of constantly high unemployment and the absence of any investment in our young people's future.

My hometown of Derry has lived through that nightmare of high unemployment, emigration and little hope. We have endured the worst elements of conflict and now we are working to turn the tide of history. And we are succeeding. Today Derry has a youthful, energetic and very well educated population. Our University at Magee College has one of the best IT centres of any college in Ireland. We have a first class human resource base in Derry and I am determined that its potential will be fulfilled.

Today more and more of our young people are growing up free from violence and able to live and work in the country of their birth. I want I register the genuine gratitude of the people of Ireland to the people of America who have stood with us over the years and whose help is so central to the building our new society.

The United States of America has been a true friend of the peace process in Northern Ireland and continues to be. The support of the US is been vital as we work to leave our conflict behind. It is no overstatement to say that without the United States there might never have been a peace process in Northern Ireland and perhaps we may never have been able to reach the historic agreement of Good Friday 1998.

First, America gave us four dedicated public servants and true friends of Ireland.

Senator Edward Kennedy has, from the very beginning, worked for peace and justice and stayed the course with us throughout the worst and the best days of this long journey. To put Ted's own words in a different context, he has given his help, but even more he has given his heart.

Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill was the man with the biggest heart I ever met. He was powerfully committed to peace in Northern Ireland, instrumental in both encouraging the two governments to work together and in setting up the International Fund for Ireland, which has created many thousands of jobs in the border region of Ireland.

Former Governor Hugh Carey and Senator Daniel Moynihan have been constant sources of strength and support for nearly thirty years. Their dedication to the cause of peace in Northern Ireland is second to none.

In President Clinton you gave us a leader deeply committed to the search for peace, a commitment that was and is of outstanding value to our peace process.

And you gave us Senator George Mitchell, who steered the talks process that culminated in the Agreement with a level of patience and understanding that only a true statesman could achieve.

I am certain that, without the unflinching support of these great friends in particular and without the United States in general the peace process would not be where it is today. And given the level of investment into our peace process from the US and so many quarters, we recognise the imperative of restoring the Agreement now and implementing it in full, so that other areas of conflict can look to us and follow our example.

Presently, the political process in Northern Ireland is enduring major difficulties. For more than four years the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has been stymied by a reluctance, or refusal on the part of some who signed up to the Agreement to deliver it in full.

At present the British and Irish Governments are holding all-party talks (or at least talks for all those parties who care enough to take part) aimed at creating a new dynamic for restoring the Agreement.

I am calling on all participants to these talks to use them constructively. The purpose of the talks must be to address the confidence issues and rebuild the necessary trust so that the Agreement can be put back on track and we can all get back to delivering real change on day to day issues.

In spite of current difficulties, the fact remains that the Good Friday Agreement is our best hope for the future. It is the world's best blueprint for conflict resolution. Good people around the world need to know that conflict can be ended and that peace, hope and justice can prevail. Equally, those who are intent on perpetrating acts of evil upon the world need to know that their deeds cannot and will not break the human spirit.

In attempting to address the core of the problems in Northern Ireland over the last three decades, we first of all had to recognise that there were two mindsets in the North of Ireland that had to change. They were the Unionist and Nationalist mindsets.

On one hand, the Unionists wished to protect their identity and their ethos. We had no quarrel with that. Not only have Unionists every right to protect their identity, it is absolutely essential in attempting to resolve our problem that the identity of Unionism is fully protected and respected.

It was the methods employed by Unionists with which we disagreed, holding all power in their own hands. The system of government in the old Northern Ireland was to exclude anyone who was not Unionist. This, of course, led to widespread discrimination in jobs, housing and voting rights. Our challenge to Unionists was to recognise that because of their geography and their numbers the problem could not be resolved without them. Therefore we challenged them to come to the negotiating table and reach an agreement through which their identity could be fully upheld. They did.

The Nationalist mindset had to change as well. Our challenge to that mindset was that it was people that had rights not territory, that without people any piece of earth is only a jungle. It was the people of Ireland that were divided not the territory and therefore agreement among all the people was the only solution. The logic of the challenge to that mindset was that since it was the people of Ireland that were divided violence had not only no role to play in solving the problem. Violence only served to deepen the divisions and make the problems worse. The line on the map is only a symptom of a much deeper border. The real border that had to be addressed was in the hearts and minds of people. That is a problem that cannot be solved either through victory or violence: again, that requires agreement.

The changes we argued for in both mindsets therefore work towards the same objective - agreement.

In preparation for any such agreement the need for a clear definition of the problem was essential. The SDLP analysis of the problem and our strategy for resolving it was totally consistent.

We argued that the people of Ireland were divided on three sets of relationships - relations within Northern Ireland, relations within Ireland and the relations between Britain and Ireland.

The logic of that analysis therefore was that in any talks aimed at reaching agreement, those three sets of relationships should provide the fulcrum for the negotiations' agenda. We argued that the talks should therefore involve both Governments as well as the Northern Ireland parties. It is taken for granted today that the two Governments working together to solve the Northern Ireland problem is natural. It is a very welcome and necessary situation, but it took a considerable number of years to bring that about.

Clearly it was not an easy process, but we stuck with it. Given that throughout that whole period people were being murdered on a daily basis, I have to ask: was there any other way?

Given that our analysis of the problem was the three sets of relationships, it was logical to pursue such a strategy and indeed we published a policy document in April 1981 which provided the fore-runner for the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985. This agreement was, in my opinion, the first major step in the peace process and that first major step was underlined in article one, which said:

- (a) "The two governments affirm that any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland;
- (b) Recognise that the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland is for no change in the status of Northern Ireland;

- (c) Declare that, if in the 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 had accepted the principle of consent. When the SDLP was founded we made clear in our constitution that we would be seeking the unity of the people of Ireland. But given that it was the people that were divided true unity could only come about by agreement and therefore required the consent of the majority in the North. That is a principle that was very central to our consistent strategy and is now accepted by the whole of Nationalist Ireland.

The SDLP also proposed that with any agreement reached, the last word would be with the people in referendum, rather than with the politicians. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland have therefore given their consent to the Good Friday Agreement. Those anti-Agreement Unionists who are opposed to the Agreement must surely realise that if they were to succeed in overthrowing the Good Friday Agreement they would in effect overthrowing the principle of consent, which is a fundamental principle of their own ethos.

What was, however, crucially important in the peace process was article 1c of the Anglo-Irish Agreement which we in the SDLP worked to achieve. In discussions with the British Government under Margaret Thatcher we made the point that the consistent position of British Government had been that Northern Ireland was an integral part of the UK because a majority so wished for it. We asked the British Government what would be the case if a



majority of the people of Northern Ireland wanted Irish unity. Would they agree to it?

The reason I put this forward was that it was dealing 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. Once article 1c was published in the Anglo-Irish Agreement that was the first step in our peace process.

In my statement welcoming the Anglo-Irish agreement, I pointed out that the British Government had now declared their neutrality on the future of Northern Ireland, that Irish Unity was therefore a matter of those who wanted it persuading those who didn't. In so doing the traditional IRA reasons for violence – always deeply flawed - were now completely negated.

My statement on British Government neutrality and call for an end to violence led some time later to a request to meet with Sinn Fein and it led to the talks with Gerry Adams.

The traditional reason 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 Irish people have the right to self-determination, they were divided on how that right should be exercised. If the Irish people are defined by all of the people who live on the island, violence or physical force was not a solution; it would only deepen the division. Agreement was the necessary solution.

On the other reason, I argued that the British did not have any economic or strategic reason for being in Ireland. Basically as our dialogue took place I was asked to prove those points as it would lead to an IRA 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 get an agreement that would have the allegiance of both sections of our community.

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

In devising a strategy for achieving agreement between our people, the SDLP drew considerable inspiration from the example of the European Union. Over the years I have spoken regularly about 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.

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 and no one untouched. 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 2003, 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.

All conflict, as I have said, is about difference, whether it is 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. Respect for difference is therefore the first principle of European Union. It is also the first principle of the Good Friday Agreement because both identities are respected and there is no victory for either side.

The second principle of European Union was to create inclusive institutions that respect difference - a Council of Ministers, a Civil Service Commission drawn from all countries and a Parliament also drawn from all countries. That principle is also central to the Good Friday Agreement, with the Assembly and Executive both elected by proportional representation to ensure that all sections of our people are represented, along with Councils of Ministers that help reshape Irish and British relationships. This underlines the importance of restoring the institutions as the basis for properly addressing the core of our problems in Northern Ireland.

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.

When I was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998, I quoted the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, who said:

"Too long a sacrifice  
can make a stone of the heart".

There have been times during the course of the last thirty years in Northern Ireland when the search for peace may have seemed futile, that the sterile cycle of violence and political failure that led to so much devastation and despair could never end.

But the Belfast writer C.S. Lewis once said that 'between no hope and very little hope lies a vast ocean of possibility'. He was right. In Northern Ireland there has always been hope. Ordinary people never lost faith that a new road could be travelled. On Good Friday 1998, the political parties in the North of Ireland chose to walk a new road. We chose the way of peace, of partnership, of opportunity. The people of Ireland, North and South, opted to walk that new road with us. And yet today, more than four and a half years later, we appear to have travelled only a short distance. We have discovered that the road is long and arduous, but we know we must walk it.

In spite of the difficulties, I remain convinced that Ireland has set out on an irreversible course towards a peaceful future where everyone can enjoy equal and fundamental human rights, where every young Irish person can

find work and enjoy a good quality of life, where the pursuit of our common interest is the most potent expression of our shared patriotism.

The full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is the vehicle for delivering that new Ireland.

The time has now come to learn that humanity transcends difference, that difference is the very essence of humanity. Diversity is a good thing. It is a healthy thing. No longer can it be allowed to drive us apart. No longer can it be allowed to perpetuate sterile and bloody conflict. Instead, the potential of difference must be fostered as a valuable tool for bringing people together.

No two human beings are the same. Humanity is clearly richer for difference. The answer to difference is to respect it rather than to fight about it, to live for ideals rather than die for them.

The time has come for us all to respect our common humanity.

The time has come for us all to commit fully to achieving the end of all conflict.

In these early days of a new millennium, let us all proclaim that the time for a peaceful world has arrived.