



Speech of

John Hume

to the

**First Plenary
Session**

of

**Strand 1
of the Talks**

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Our community has been in turmoil for almost a quarter of a century. The statistics of the dead and the maimed have been rehearsed so often, that we have become desensitised as a community to the full horrors of the pain and suffering they represent.

There have been many similar periods of disorder in our past, not just since the foundation of Northern Ireland, but for generations and even centuries before that. Northern Ireland did not exist in 1690, or even in 1916. Our problem is more fundamental than the existence of Northern Ireland, or the question of how it is administered.

Stable relationships have never existed between the peoples represented around this table. There has always been bad blood between us. We have caused each other terrible hurts for centuries, and we have never settled our quarrel. We have been quick to lay blame, and adamantly unforgiving. We have never really talked together before, as we have the opportunity to do now.

As a result of our failure to settle our quarrel, we are a powerless people. Decisions, which in any other community in the Democratic world would be taken by elected representatives, are taken here by others because we cannot agree on a means of doing these things for ourselves. The indignity of that situation weakens and devalues the political process itself, and leaves a gap which extreme organisations try to fill with promises of quick solutions and easy shortcuts.

We have never been short of extremists who believe that force is the answer, that violence is the only effective means of settling matters. And even though they have been quiescent for periods in the past, they have never disappeared. Their thinking and activities, however have consistently deepened the problem because they have consistently pursued the unattainable, which is a complete triumph of one tradition over the other. And those politicians who follow the same policy, of seeking complete triumph for their point of view, contribute to instability and violence, because such attitudes are inherently violent.



It seems incredible that we have taken so long to get to this point, of actually talking to each other about our differences. It would be even more incredible if we were to leave this table prematurely, without resolving those differences. I believe that however long it takes, however difficult the issues, whatever hiccups there may be along the way, we must not leave this table until our differences are resolved.

If we are to succeed in resolving our differences. Then we must face those differences honestly and directly. There is little point in either of us saying to the other, "We cannot change, so you must". Neither of us can change what we are. What we can, and must, change are our attitudes, our intolerance of difference, our repeated pushing of difference to the point of division. We must begin by accepting each other for what we are, accepting that we each have an absolute right to be what we are and that we cannot, either of us, change what we are.

That is where our analysis of the problem begins. With our failure to accept our differences, and our failure to devise political structures which accommodate those differences. As a first step, therefore, we wish to table our analysis paper for discussion. It is our view that, when each party has tabled its analysis of the problem, we should seek through debate and discussion, to identify whatever common ground and common perceptions exist between us. Having done that we believe that we should seek to identify those requirements which will be necessary to the survival of any new arrangements we may wish to make. And we for our part have prepared a paper on these requirements, which we will table at that stage, for discussion.

It has been our view that it will be necessary for us at that point to reflect and to consult, before coming forward with proposals.

We look forward to discussing our analysis paper with you. It begins, as I have said, with difference, the question of what we are, the question of identities. We each define what we are in terms of relationships which transcend the confines of Northern Ireland. For that



reason it has seemed impossible to us to deal with our problem without reference to those other peoples who are involved in the aspirations and loyalties of either side. We must resolve, not only our relationship with each other, but our relationships with those states to which each side believes it properly belongs. And the two states concerned must look again at their relationships with each other. These last two considerations are the business of Strands two and three of these talks.

Strand 1 is about our relationship - the relationship between Unionist and Nationalist in Northern Ireland. We could begin by trying to define who the Nationalists and the Unionists are.

In the New Ireland Forum Report we, along with the other Nationalist parties on this island, defined ourselves as those who identify themselves as part of a nation which extends throughout this island, and who seek the unity and independence of that nation. For historical reasons we may in the past have defined ourselves in terms of separation from Britain, and opposition to British domination of Ireland. The more positive vision of Irish Nationalism in recent times, has been to create a society that transcends all differences and that can accommodate all traditions in a sovereign independent Ireland united by agreement.

In the Forum Report we attempted to define Unionists as those who generally regard themselves as being British, the inheritors of a specific communal loyalty to the British Crown. We discerned three major elements in the identity of Unionists, their Britishness, their Protestantism and their belief in the economic advantage of being part of the British state. At the same time we discerned an Irish element in the makeup of Unionists, an identification with at least some features of Irish life and culture.

We will be interested to debate these definitions with you, to see how far our perception of ourselves and each other are shared.

It is our belief that these two communities, however they are defined, have certain inalienable rights. If our strategy



for dealing with this problem were to be reduced, to its most essential core, it would be the need to create new arrangements in this island to accommodate together those two sets of legitimate rights:

- The right of Nationalists to effective political symbolic and administrative expression of their identity.
- The right of Unionists to effective political symbolic and administrative expression of their identity, their ethos and their way of life.

No solution is available to us through victory for either of these identities. So long as the legitimate rights of both Unionists and Nationalists are not accommodated together in new arrangements acceptable to both, that situation will continue to give rise to conflict and instability. We are convinced that acceptance of the legitimate rights of both traditions can be the starting point of genuine reconciliation and dialogue which can overcome the fears and divisions of the past and create a new atmosphere of peace and stability.

We do not confine our attention to these islands, however. The changing shape of Europe is a dynamic context which has profound implications of the most far-reaching kind for all of us. We cannot insulate ourselves from what is happening in Europe and the wider world. Some of the most fundamental decisions affecting our peoples, for example, in relation to the very land we live on and the food on our tables, are taken not in London, Dublin or Belfast, but in Brussels. There is, therefore, a strong European dimension to our relationships. Indeed, the search for accommodation and consensus in which we are involved, mirrors the search for new political structures in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South Africa and elsewhere. And the current debate within the European community, about reconciling the rights of individual peoples with the greater good of the whole, is simply another version of our own debate transferred to the larger stage.

I have often pointed out that the European community is the most outstanding example of conflict resolution in

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recent times. Our involvement with the community, and the involvement of the community with us, is a positive and benign influence upon our affairs, and we should seek to maximise it.

The price of failure to resolve the differences between us is immense. In this paper we attempt to measure the human, the social and the economic cost, as well as the cost in terms of human rights. But how could we begin to measure the human suffering involved for our community in the figure of almost three thousand dead - in percentage terms, a figure greater than the total killed in the American Civil War.

That stark comparison, which places our quarrel in the context of its proportion to other major conflicts, should spur us to the most profound review of our relationships since 1921.

We in the SDLP are committed to the view that the political process alone offer the hope of a solution to the problems which beset this community. It is the "Raison D'etre" of our party. It is our fervent hope that the Talks upon which we are now embarking will lead to an agreement which will protect the identities and promote the interests of both communities and traditions.

