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Ireland—The Healing Process

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Ireland–The Healing Process

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Abstract

As you are aware, the quarrel on our island has gone on for several centuries. Looking at the example of the conflict in Ireland, there are two mentalities in our quarrel - the Nationalist and the Unionist. The real political challenge to the Unionist mindset occurred when Nationalist Ireland essentially said: "Look, your objective is an honorable objective, the protection and preservation of your identity." Geography, history, and the size of the Unionist tradition guarantee that the problem cannot be solved without them, nor against them. If we can leave aside our quarrel while we work together in our common interest, spilling our sweat and not our blood, we will break down the barriers of centuries, too, and the new Ireland will evolve based on agreement and respect for difference, just as the rest of the European Union has managed to achieve over the years—the healing process. That is the philosophy that I hope, at last, is going to emerge in your neighboring island of Ireland. I look forward to our island being the bridge between the United States of America and the United States of Europe.

IRELAND—THE HEALING PROCESS

*John Hume**

Ladies and gentleman, I am obviously very honored to receive this doctorate from such a distinguished university as Fordham today and to hear your warm and strong support for the peace process in our country, particularly at this very crucial time in our history.

As you are aware, the quarrel on our island has gone on for several centuries. It has been very bitter, especially during the last thirty years. My hope and dream is, as we move into the next century, now less than a short year and few months away, that it will be the first century in our history in which we will have no killings on our streets and no obligatory emigration of our young people to other lands to earn a living.

In this regard, we know that we can rely on harnessing the goodwill of this land very strongly. The support for peace and economic development in Ireland from the leaders and the people of the United States has been quite outstanding. We are deeply grateful to President Clinton and our great friends in the U.S. Congress.

The last third of this century in our country has been among the worst in our centuries-old quarrel. Three thousand five hundred people have lost their lives out of a population of a million and a half. Thus, one out of five hundred people have died. Thirty thousand people have been maimed and injured. Consequently, one out of fifty people have been maimed or injured. There is hardly a person in Northern Ireland who does not personally know some family that has suffered. That is how bad it has been.

Let me give you a very frightening example of the extent of the conflict. In the city of Belfast, which has one of the highest rates of church attendance in the whole of urban Europe on both sides of the divide, it has been necessary to build thirteen walls to separate and protect one section of a Christian people

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from another. I have always regarded those walls as an indictment—an indictment of all of us—because our past attitudes built them. The presence of so much concrete and barbed wire has reflected the state of hearts and minds of too many of our citizens.

The challenge is to be positive in such a situation. I was brought up by my parents, in an environment of poverty and discrimination, to be positive. You have to be realistic. But you also have to take problems as challenges, not excuses. The positive way of looking at those walls is to say—do I really want to live in such a society? Do we really want children to grow up in the shadows of those walls? The walls force us to question our attitudes. How did our past attitudes lead us into such a state? How can we transcend those attitudes? If these walls are to come down, we must re-examine our past attitudes.

Attitudes and mentalities are the basis for conflict, or for peace. When you look at the mentalities involved in our conflict, and when you study conflict, you realize that these situations are not unique. Underlying every conflict, you realize that the same factors prevail everywhere. It is about difference and seeing difference as a threat, whether your difference is your religion, your nationality, your ethnicity, or your race. All conflicts are about those things. You discover that the underlying attitudes among the different groups in a divided society are remarkably similar.

Political objectives of the participants in a conflict may differ, but the mentalities are largely the same. Looking at the example of the conflict in Ireland, there are two mentalities in our quarrel—the Nationalist and the Unionist. Peace is not possible unless both of those mindsets change. I believe that this is what is actually happening in our time in Ireland. Both mindsets are now in the process of changing.

The Nationalist mindset, which I have described as a territorial mindset, comes down to a simple proposition. It can be summed up in the statement, "Ireland is our land and it must be united even though a minority don't want to unite." The challenge to that mindset is quite simple and straightforward: it is people that have rights, not territory. Even our beautiful island, without its people, is only a jungle. The people of Ireland are divided, not the territory. The real border in Ireland is not a

line on a map. The line on the map is only a symptom of a much deeper border, which is in the minds and hearts of people. You do not cure that by one side taking over the other. Therefore, our conflict can only be resolved by agreement.

That is the change that has had to take place in the Nationalist mindset. Indeed, that change has taken place. When we began the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement involving all of Northern Ireland's political parties and the British and Irish Governments, the tradition that could be generally described as Nationalist Ireland (the Irish government, the parties in Dail Eireann, and the Social Democratic and Labour Party ("SDLP") and Sinn Féin, parties from the Nationalist tradition in Northern Ireland) was, despite our various perspectives, united on one issue. We all went to the talks with the objective of reaching agreement with the Unionist people. That agreement was eventually reached on Good Friday 1998, and it was overwhelmingly endorsed by the people of all traditions in a referendum in both parts of the island. That is an historic breakthrough, which I believe will be a major force for change in Ireland.

It is in fact difficult to underestimate the importance of the endorsement of the Agreement by the people. For the first time since 1918, the whole of Ireland voted on the same day to decide the future of the island. This vote constitutes a popular mandate supporting agreement that we are prepared to live together in peace on the island. This agreement provides an enormous political strength in bringing about change in Ireland.

Then there is a Unionist mindset that equally has had and continues to face the challenge of change. I have described the Unionist mindset as the Afrikaner mindset because it has been compared and linked traditionally to the attitude that prevailed in the old South Africa. Knowing that they are a minority in Ireland as a whole, Unionists have believed that the only way to protect themselves has been to hold all power in their own hands. Traditionally, the system in Northern Ireland operated to exclude non-Unionists. Growing up in the North, that was very obvious. There was serious discrimination in employment, housing, and voting rights. The injustice and lack of sustainability of that system led to the civil rights movement. In reality, the system of discrimination and exclusion harmed everyone in Northern Ireland. You cannot guarantee your own secur-

ity through oppression. You cannot secure your own rights through injustice.

So the challenge to the Unionist mindset has been to find a way of protecting its own identity while respecting that of others. The real political challenge to the Unionist mindset occurred when Nationalist Ireland essentially said: "Look, your objective is an honorable objective, the protection and preservation of your identity. Every society is richer for diversity. It's not the objective that we quarrel with, it's the method."

There can be no solution to our problem that diminishes the status of one side or another. Geography, history, and the size of the Unionist tradition guarantee that the problem cannot be solved without them, nor against them. Therefore, the challenge to which Unionism must respond is the same as that which the Nationalist mindset has addressed. How do we accommodate our differences? The only solution is for us all to come to the table and to reach an agreement that protects our respective identities.

We all eventually did come to the table. Both mindsets have evolved and began to converge in the same direction—towards reaching agreement. The realistic and desirable objective for all of us must be to find an agreement on sharing the small piece of earth on which we live. At last, that has happened.

In approaching the nature of that agreement, some of us were very heavily inspired by our European experience. I will never forget that when I was first elected to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 1979, I went for a walk. I walked across the bridge over the Rhine from Strasbourg, the European frontier town par excellence, to the neighboring German city of Kehl, only two hundred yards. I stopped in the middle of that bridge and thought: "What if someone had stood on this bridge thirty years ago just after World War II with Europe lying in ruins, 25 million dead, the continent devastated for the second time in a generation? What if that person had said: 'Don't worry, in thirty years' time we will all be together, there will be no more wars between our countries, there will be a united Europe, and the French will still be French and the Germans will still be Germans.' Well, that person would have been sent to a psychiatrist."

But, remarkably, that is precisely what happened. I believe

that it is the duty of anyone in any area of conflict to study how that was achieved. We have certainly done so in Ireland, and that has had profound results. Clearly there are parts of Europe where the old attitudes persist. But it is clear to me that those Europeans who are still engaged in conflict need to look to the European Union and its lessons if they want to emerge from the morass in which they are mired.

I believe that there are three fundamental principles that have allowed the European Union to overcome Europe's terrible history. First, there was a fundamental change of heart. Instead of difference being a threat, there has been a recognition that difference is natural. There are not two human beings in this room who are the same. There are not two in the entire race who are the same. Difference is of the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth. None of us chose to be born. Therefore, whether your difference is your religion, or your nationality, or your ethnicity, or your race, it is an accident of birth. It is not something that we should fight about. It is something that we should respect.

This principle is so self-evident and is such common sense that you may well ask: "What is the big deal here?" That is one of the great tragedies of humanity—that there is no big deal about the fundamental truths. Most profundities are simplicities. Respect for difference is the simple message of peace, indeed the precondition of peace. That is the lesson that Europe learned at great cost and over many generations.

The second step was to respect difference by creating institutions that accept that there are and will be differences. A Frenchwoman is not going to become a German. A Dutchman is not going to become French. Our cultural and political identities are recognized and reflected in our political institutions. The Council of Ministers ensures that the governments of Europe are involved in the European Union. The European Commission exists to ensure that the collective interests of the European Union are respected. The European Parliament ensures that all shades of European political opinion have a voice in policy and legislation (over 100 European political parties have at least one member of the European Parliament).

Third, the purpose of our European institutions is to concentrate on our common interests. They have created the cir-

cumstances in which peoples and governments from the Oder to the Shannon, from Lapland to Andalucia, work together in their common interests and the common interest of humanity. These common interests are very substantial, particularly in the social and economic fields. In my view, they are far more important than our conflicts of interests. In other words, in the European Union, the conflicts of the centuries have been overcome because Europeans decided to spill their sweat, not their blood.

That is exactly the philosophy behind our agreement in Ireland. If you study it, you will see that it explicitly recognizes that difference is something in Ireland that we are going to have to respect and not fight about. We have agreed to create institutions that will respect and reflect our differences. We have a proportionately-elected assembly now, which means that all sections of our people are represented there. That assembly has the task of proportionally electing an administration in which all major parties in the North will be represented. There will also be institutions linking North and South so that the two parts of the island will be able to work together in our common interests, which are very substantial. Indeed, the process of agreeing on those institutions revealed to everyone the range and scope of those common interests. They include agricultural policy, our common role within the European Union, industrial policy, the promotion of tourism, and cooperation in health and education. We have huge scope for developing our joint endeavors. It will be one of the great challenges of the twenty-first century in Ireland.

If we can leave aside our quarrel while we work together in our common interest, spilling our sweat and not our blood, we will break down the barriers of centuries, too, and the new Ireland will evolve based on agreement and respect for difference, just as the rest of the European Union has managed to achieve over the years—the healing process.

I have always made it clear that our Agreement is not a solution to our problem. It is a framework for the healing process. The real problem in Ireland is a deep centuries-old division among the people. At the heart of that there are prejudices, there are hatreds, there are distrusts. You do not get rid of that in a week or a fortnight. We have to face up to the depth of our divisions and recognize that hard work and time are necessary to break down the barriers of centuries.

That is where our diaspora comes in as well. Due to our tragic history, there are tens of millions of people of Irish extraction in the United States. The international goodwill towards us has been absolutely amazing, particularly in the United States and the European Union. One of the challenges that now faces us is to harness that goodwill. One of the areas in which we can harness it is in our most obvious common ground—the economic sphere. We intend to utilize the massive international goodwill to secure both the marketing of our small companies' products and inward investment.

This is not simply a question of relying on sympathy. We will be putting forward hard-headed proposals that benefit the United States and ourselves. We will be making a vigorous case in the United States to demonstrate the advantages of trade with, and investment in, us. We are, after all, a part of the largest single market in the world. We offer a gateway to that lucrative market. We can be the bridge between the United States and Europe.

We need especially to give hope to our young people. It is no accident that the areas of greatest violence and greatest involvement of young people in that violence in the last thirty years were the areas of highest unemployment. We must address the issues of employment and economic development, issues that have to be very high up on the agenda of any decent political system. Tackling those problems is crucial to building the new future. We are looking forward to working together with our friends in the United States as we prepare the reconstruction and regeneration of our social and economic environment.

In doing all of that, and in explaining to you how we have been inspired by the European Union, let us not forget that the European Union itself was inspired by the United States. We owe a great deal to the vision of George Marshall and his work for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II. Jean Monnet, the principal thinker behind the creation of the European Union, spent crucial parts of his career working in Washington.

Perhaps sometimes Americans forget that the founders of this country founded it in a manner that created a message of peace for the whole world. That philosophy is found in three words written on your humblest coin, the cent. I wonder how many know what those words are. I remember reading them

one time—*e pluribus unum*. The founders of the United States, driven from their lands across the Atlantic by intolerance, by famine, by deprivation, by injustice, decided that in their new land that was not going to happen again to anyone. And their formula for their constitution and institutions was summed up in those three words—out of many we are one. The essence of our unity is respect for diversity. That is the philosophy that I hope, at last, is going to emerge in your neighboring island of Ireland.

I use the phrase “neighboring island” advisedly. We are living through the most profound revolution in the history of the world. In the nineteenth century, when many of our ancestors left Ireland to come here on sailing ships, their families held what was called an “American wake” because they knew they would never see them again or even hear their voice again. Those days have been left behind as the technological, telecommunications, and transport revolution makes the world a smaller place. The interactions that take place are so intense that the fact that we are physically located some 3000 miles away is more or less irrelevant. We are now neighbors as well as friends.

That is my dream for the next century—an Ireland at peace enjoying the levels of prosperity that prevail in the most developed societies in the world. I look forward to our island being the bridge between the United States of America and the United States of Europe. I firmly believe that it will be a relationship to our mutual advantage.

Thank you very much for honoring me today. I regard this as an expression of your support for the hard work that we are doing on the ground in building a new Ireland for the new century.