
Speech by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar T.D. Launch of ‘John Hume in America’ by Maurice Fitzpatrick

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. I am delighted to have been asked to launch this book because it is an opportunity to honour a statesman and leader who changed the course of Irish history. As Maurice Fitzpatrick notes in this important and timely book, John Hume is unique in being the only person to have won the Nobel Prize for Peace, the Martin Luther King Peace Award, and the International Gandhi Peace Prize. I believe that posterity will bestow on him an even greater honour, and that is the title of peacemaker.

In the foreword to this book, Senator George Mitchell acknowledges that many people contributed to the bringing of peace to this island. A number of them contributed to this book and to the accompanying film, and they too deserve to be honoured. And I am delighted that some of them were able to join us here tonight. Senator Mitchell also recognises that ‘the primary architect’ was John Hume. Hume he says is ‘an extraordinary leader who was able to offer a new way’. As we face the challenge of Brexit, and look to maintain the hard-won peace on this island, his vision continues to offer us a way forward.

When John Hume first stood for election in 1969 at the age of thirty-two he did so on a platform of ‘justice’ and ‘inclusion’, seeking to create a non-sectarian movement that would oppose sectarian division. It was a message that resonated outside of Ireland, and brought him to the attention of Senator Ted Kennedy, and other influential figures in the United States. They respected him as a civil rights leader, someone who spoke for the rights of ordinary people.

This book is a masterful study of how this son of the Bogside, with the help of the Irish Government, mobilised the power of successive Presidents of the United States, to change the course of Irish history. It began with President Carter and continued through to President Clinton, and it helped save this island from chaos, injustice and the depravity of violence. Hume believed that ‘When people are divided, the only solution is agreement’. His new doctrine of realism, inclusivity and partnership, combined with an unyielding opposition to violence, helped bring about that agreement.

This book shows how John Hume was able to persuade senior US politicians - ‘the Four Horsemen’ - to work with him on changing outdated political views in the United States on Ireland. He was aided in this work by the Irish diplomat, Michael Lillis, who we learn was able to use his diplomatic immunity to bring Cuban cigars into the country! Apparently these were the first things that the Speaker of the House, Tipp O’Neill, went for whenever he visited. After the cigars, there followed serious discussions with John Hume, and the result of these efforts was a political force in the United States that was prepared to engage constructively on Irish affairs. Traditional attitudes in Irish-America were challenged, and relationships on Capitol Hill and in the White House were built.

As this book shows, the United States was crucially important for Hume, but so too was Europe. John Hume was elected to the first directly elected European parliament in 1979 and he served for five terms. Hume saw the European Union as the greatest peace process in history. As some scholars have noted, it provided an inspiration, a vision, and a model for his thinking on Northern Ireland. He later admitted that it was no accident that the structures established by the Anglo-Irish Agreement reflected those of the European Union.

Today we are again at a crossroads. In this country we respect and accept the democratic decision of the people of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, even though we deeply regret it. At the same time, we know the government and people of the United Kingdom will respect the spirit and the letter of the profoundly transformative and historic referenda that were held in Ireland in 1998 which endorsed the Good Friday settlement. In the months and years ahead we will work to preserve John Hume’s powerful historic legacy which has been endorsed by majorities in the North and in the South.

The Good Friday Agreement showed what can be achieved when we work together for a shared objective. Back then, some critics didn’t think there would be a successful outcome, but they were wrong. Anyone who thinks the problem of Brexit is also intractable will likewise be disappointed. The Government will continue to work to build bridges not borders, and we are determined to protect everything that has been achieved through the peace process.

On this special occasion, I am delighted that some of John’s family are able to join us tonight. I hope they will send back to John and Pat our best wishes, and our thanks on behalf of a grateful country. Over the years, John and Pat gave much for the cause of Ireland, facing criticism and condemnation, experiencing isolation, braving death threats, and even fire-bombings of their home. They carried on their work with courage and a quiet determination. They are true patriots.

In launching this book I want to congratulate Maurice Fitzpatrick and Irish Academic Press on a superb production. Seamus Heaney wrote some lines of poetry that are believed to refer to John Hume and they capture his essence. He writes that he was the ‘one among us who never swerved’. He followed his instincts, he always did what he believed was right, and he ‘stood his ground’.

Ladies and gentlemen, this invaluable book ends with the text of John Hume’s speech when accepting the Nobel Prize. He said that he wanted to see an Ireland

that provided an example to men and women everywhere of ‘what can be achieved by living for ideals, rather than fighting for them, and by viewing each and every person as worthy of respect and honour’.

Today we came so close to agreeing a text on the border that met our concerns. Although we are surprised and disappointed that we were not able to secure that agreement, we will continue to work for something that safeguards all that has been achieved in recent years - and we believe it can still be done. We have no hidden agenda. Our guiding light is that we want to protect the Good Friday Agreement.

In his Nobel Lecture, John Hume said something that should be our inspiration tonight as we continue to seek a solution: ‘And so, the challenge now is to grasp and shape history: to show that past grievances and injustices can give way to a new generosity of spirit and action.’

The best way we can honour the life and legacy of John Hume is by working together on this island to build that future and achieve that dream.

Thank you.