

John Hume

Northern Ireland's peace-maker and committed European

SUMMARY

Throughout his life, John Hume (1937-2020) sought to improve the circumstances of the people of Northern Ireland, beginning in his home city of Derry (Londonderry to its unionist residents). Born just a decade and a half after partition, and in a city whose hinterland had been divided by the border, he naturally wished for the unification of Ireland. But he saw that that could not be achieved without realistic plans, nor without a partnership between the two major communities in Northern Ireland, unionist and nationalist.

While working as a school-teacher, in the belief that they could themselves better their lot, he drove forward a wide range of actions to improve the economic circumstances of his community – which was far from the priority of the unionist government in Belfast. A nationalist community that was increasingly vocal in calling for fairer treatment brought him a leading role in the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, before he made the switch to elected office in the Northern Ireland Parliament. The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) that he co-founded was part of a short-lived power-sharing government in 1974, but it was to be a false dawn, followed by direct rule from London for more than two decades.

With killings a part of everyday life in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, John Hume argued incessantly that violence was not the means to bring about the unification of Ireland, but rather that understanding and respecting each other's differences was the key to finding peace. He worked continuously to bring together the different parties and governments, all of which needed to be involved to resolve the conflict, as shown by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In that, he was inspired by the model of post-war European integration. His own experience as a Member of the European Parliament for 25 years (1979-2004) confirmed that a more collaborative approach to addressing differences could pay off. The design of the structures in the Good Friday Agreement owes much to his European experience, but it is thanks to his perseverance – in the face of considerable risks to both him and his family – in persuading those wedded to violence that there was a peaceful solution, that those institutions became reality.



John Hume in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, 1979. © European Communities.

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Taking the initiative on behalf of his community

John Hume was born in 1937, the eldest of seven children, in Derry, Northern Ireland's second city. Like so many of those with a similar background, he was the first in his family to receive a secondary education, gaining a scholarship thanks to reforms enacted by the post-war Labour government in London. He then went on to study for the priesthood, attending Maynooth College, outside Dublin. Concluding that the clerical life was not for him, he graduated with a degree in French and history. Spending time as a student in France not only left him fluent in French, but enabled him to see the situation in his country from a more objective perspective.

After his studies, he started teaching, but rapidly became engaged in an ever-broadening range of activities aimed at improving the lot of his community. 'As far back as I can remember, I was always aware of discrimination against the Catholic community,' he says in *Personal Views*. From partition onwards, Northern Ireland had been governed by the unionist majority, which concentrated resources on the area around Belfast to the detriment of the majority Catholic-nationalist western counties. The nationalist population was generally lower down the socio-economic scale than their unionist counterparts. On top of that, they often faced [discrimination](#) in access to employment and to the growing stock of public housing, as well as in political representation. In Derry, with a Catholic population of over 60 %, gerrymandering ensured unionists a majority on the city council.

Rather than complaining, John Hume sought ways to act to improve the situation of his community. In 1960, he was a driving-force in launching a credit union in the Bogside district of Derry, to help people unable to access bank loans, and was soon leading the credit union movement across Ireland. He campaigned unsuccessfully to have Northern Ireland's second university sited in Derry. In 1965 too, he was a founder of the Derry Housing Association, which aimed to make better quality houses available. Efforts to attract companies to set up around Derry had limited success, so he and associates set up their own business smoking salmon from the River Foyle, and in 1966 he quit teaching to run the company.

He worked with a growing group of colleagues and friends, but his wife Patricia Hone – they were married in December 1960 – was a constant support throughout his work. A teacher herself, and mother to their five children, she would manage his office throughout his five terms as an MEP. 'He didn't have any great interest in politics,' in the early days, she claimed.

Stepping up to political challenges

The civil rights movement – reflecting the non-violent philosophy of its US namesake – was a growing presence on the streets of Northern Ireland as the Catholic-nationalist community sought a fairer society. Pictures of the police hitting demonstrators on an October 1968 march in Derry were seen around the world, raising awareness of the situation, and seemingly leading to a sense that reforms could be within reach.

In February 1969, John Hume was elected to the Northern Irish Parliament (Stormont), standing as an independent to further the demands of the civil rights movement. He had stood against the leader of the Nationalist Party, feeling 'that a more aggressive political attitude and movement was vital', to respond to the expectations of a new generation and address the immediate problems facing his community. His aim was to establish a new social democratic party, but first he allied with others from the nationalist community to push the unionist government to address injustices.

With others representing nationalist constituencies and with roots in the civil rights movement, he formed the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in August 1970. John Hume became deputy leader, with Gerry Fitt, a Member of the UK House of Commons since 1966, as leader. The party was non-sectarian, although its voters were predominantly Catholic-nationalist, and it would support the principle of consent for constitutional change, even if Irish unification remained its goal.

John and Pat Hume, 1998



Source: John and Pat Hume Foundation.

Increasingly violent clashes between nationalists/republicans and unionists/loyalists, and a police force widely seen to be biased against the former, saw Northern Ireland descend into the Troubles, which were to last a quarter century and cost some 3 720 lives. The spiralling violence of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and loyalist paramilitary organisations led the government to introduce a policy of internment – detention without trial – in 1971, under which hundreds of nationalists were detained. The SDLP withdrew from Stormont in protest, and organised sit-down and peaceful protests. John Hume and his party were implacably opposed to the violence, but the early 1970s were to be the deadliest years of the Troubles.

For John Hume, resolving the problem required talks between the British and Irish governments, but also between the unionist and nationalist political parties in Northern Ireland. In 1973, he was re-elected to Stormont, and the Unionist Party, the SDLP and the Alliance Party formed a power-sharing government for Northern Ireland on 1 January 1974. In addition, under the Sunningdale Agreement between the British and Irish governments, a Council of Ireland would bring together the two governments with the three Northern Irish parties. John Hume served as Minister for Commerce, seeking to foster economic development, particularly west of the River Bann away from the more industrialised Belfast area. But the government was to last just 148 days, brought down by mass strikes orchestrated by loyalist organisations opposed to power-sharing.

John Hume in Troubles-era Derry



Source: John and Pat Hume Foundation.

A committed European

From the earliest days of the SDLP, John Hume was clear that the party would be pro-European, and indeed he saw the Franco-German reconciliation that was at the heart of the European project as an example that ought to be applied to the island of Ireland. He saw in the European institutions a model that could work for Ireland. In the 1975 referendum, in which the UK voted to stay in the European Communities, he with most of the SDLP was firmly on the 'yes' side. Sinn Féin – the political wing of the IRA – by contrast, campaigned to leave. In 1977, John Hume went to work in the cabinet of Richard Burke, the Irish European Commissioner holding the portfolio of transport, taxation, consumer affairs and relations with the European Parliament. That showed him how the Community institutions worked, and saw him develop a broad range of contacts at European level.

The first direct elections to the European Parliament, in 1979, saw John Hume winning one of three seats in Northern Ireland, with 24.6 % of first preference votes, under the single transferable vote system. His 1979 election cemented his place as leader of the nationalist community. Shortly after that, he took over as leader of the SDLP. He would be re-elected to the European Parliament four times, serving as [MEP from 1979 to 2004](#). From 1983 to 2005, he was also a Member of the UK House of Commons, with dual mandates then still allowed for MEPs.

He joined the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, already aware of the value of the connections he could make, and was a member of the group's bureau for almost all his time as an MEP. He was a member of the Committee on Regional Policy, and a substitute on the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development. His focus throughout was on raising support for a peaceful resolution in Northern Ireland, but also – as he had throughout his career – he sought to find ways to improve its economic circumstances. On the latter, he worked regularly with his fellow Northern Irish MEPs, Ian Paisley, of the Democratic Unionist Party, and first John Taylor and then Jim Nicholson, of the Ulster Unionist Party. While their views on the constitutional position of their homeland, and even on Community membership, differed greatly, they were able to find common ground in arguing for the benefits of membership to accrue to Northern Ireland, for example in terms of structural funding, and later the fund established for Northern Ireland in the wake of the 1994 IRA ceasefire. Indeed, the relative anonymity of Strasbourg and Brussels afforded the three space, not easily found in Belfast, to discuss matters together.

The long battle for peace

In working to bring peace to Northern Ireland, John Hume stood resolute against the IRA's campaign of terror, at no small risk to his own and his family's safety. He spent much time building contacts at the highest levels in the United States, from where the republican movement gained much support, to persuade them that violence would not achieve a united Ireland. The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement confirmed that both governments had a role to play in resolving the situation, as John Hume had long argued, but unionist opposition to the agreement blocked any progress between the parties for years.

In seeking to end the violence, he embarked on a long series of meetings with Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Féin, at first held in secret. Once their talks became public, he was the subject of much criticism from many quarters. His goal was to build trust, so that the IRA would abandon its campaign, and at the same time to persuade the British government that the IRA had a real intention to end their violence. The IRA declared a ceasefire in August 1994, soon followed by the main loyalist groups. Progress in the next stage was slow, with a focus on the need to 'decommission' weapons at the same time as putting in place new governance structures, and the IRA broke its ceasefire in February 1996. Renewed in July 1997, the ceasefire enabled multi-party talks to resume, this time with Sinn Féin participating. The Good Friday, or Belfast, Agreement, reached on 10 April 1998, and subsequently approved by referendum in Northern Ireland by 71.1 % of voters (and in the south by 94.4 %), formed the basis of a power-sharing government in Stormont, although the path has been far from smooth in practice in the years since. After his retirement, Sinn Féin won the seat in the European Parliament, and have gone on to supplant the SDLP as the largest party of the nationalist community.

John Hume was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998 for his efforts in ending the violence, and finding a peaceful solution to the long-running conflict. He shared the prize with David Trimble, the Ulster Unionist Party leader, who had brought his party into the agreement when unionists had failed to deal in the past. (The Democratic Unionist Party was not party to the Agreement.) In later years, John Hume withdrew from public life due to illness, and he died on 3 August 2020, in Derry.

John Hume with Bill Clinton, 1995



Source: John and Pat Hume Foundation.

Established in November 2020, the John and Pat Hume Foundation for Peaceful Change and Reconciliation aims not just to protect their legacy, but to promote the lessons of peace and reconciliation and inspire future courageous leaders. The Foundation is a member of the European Parliament's Network of Political Houses and Foundations of Great Europeans. www.humefoundation.org

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