



On the Passing of John Hume

Hamber, B. (2020, Aug 3). On the Passing of John Hume. Hume O'Neill Peace Blog, Ulster University.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 03/08/2020

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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The Passing of John Hume

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Published on the Hume O'Neill Chair Peace Blog, 3 August 2020

<https://peaceblog.ulster.ac.uk/2020/08/03/the-passing-of-john-hume/>

John Hume is undoubtedly one of the most significant politicians of the last 50 years. It was sad to hear of his passing today, and my thoughts are first with Pat Hume and the family.

John Hume was the product of social upheaval linked to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland from 1960s onwards, and he rose to prominence from humble roots when he took a stand against violence, in many ways similar to those that significantly influenced his thinking, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.

Growing up in South Africa, and moving to Northern Ireland only in 2001, I came late to the work and philosophy of John Hume. However, when I first started to work in Derry in 1996, his home city, his legacy was impossible to ignore. This continues and is no more acute than today as he leaves the political stage forever.

In 1998, shortly after the signing of the Belfast Agreement, when I was still based in South Africa but was in Northern Ireland over the winter, I first met Pat Hume. She called at the door of my wife's sisters house where we were having a New Year's Eve party, just to say hello and wish us well. The down to earth nature of the Hume family was immediately apparent. Little did I know at the time that my history would become tied into the work of John Hume.

In 2015, I was appointed the John Hume and Thomas P. O'Neill Chair in Peace at Ulster University. The Chair honours John Hume and his pivotal role in the peace process, and Thomas P. O'Neill who, as Speaker of the House of Representatives, was a significant force for enlisting the United States in advancing peace in Northern Ireland. The two men worked together to bring the US into the peace process. The Chair recognises the contribution of both men to conflict transformation and peacebuilding by recording and sharing the lessons learned and continuing the process of peace and reconciliation for future generations. The Chair's reach extends now to South Africa, Colombia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Basque Country and Uganda, among others.

Every activity I, therefore, undertake in my professional life is tied to John Hume's legacy, and hopefully my contribution to peace locally and globally, as modest as it is, is a fitting tribute to his life and work, along with that of Tip O'Neill.

On hearing of the death of John, I wanted to make a few personal reflections, mostly about his work, which I have tried to better understand since being appointed the Hume O'Neill Chair. In the last few years, in particular, I have been reading some of Hume's speeches and watching video clips. His contribution is immense. Anyone who says that John Hume only ever made one speech, has never taken the time to mull over his words. I was also fortunate enough to be asked to write the Foreword to Sean Farren's edited book *"John Hume: In His Own Words"*. This book, which is a collection of original speeches, particularly helped me to develop a deeper understanding of Hume's politics. Some of my reflections below I also recorded in the book but wanted to share some today.

I was fortunate enough to meet John and Pat Hume many times since 1998 thanks to their association with Ulster University and the Magee Campus in particular. What always came across is

their strong belief in social justice, political tolerance and the peaceful resolution of conflict. I have further identified four key approaches routinely mentioned by John Hume to achieve this.

Firstly, Hume is committed to the idea that dialogue is essential and that conflicts can only be resolved through open discussion, even in contexts of sharp differences of opinion. Underpinning this is the idea that, certainly in Ireland, there is an inter-dependency between people that is inescapable.

Secondly, he believes that inter-dependence stretched globally. The European Union was an example of how unity and inter-dependence could be fostered. This also led Hume to recognise the importance of the US and its familial and historical connections to Ireland, as key to the peace process and stimulating economic growth, which was necessary to ensure and ultimately sustain peace. This global commitment, in part, explains his relationship with Tip O'Neill. But more profoundly this global commitment developed into Hume's form of nationalism, that is, a conviction that people and not place or geography defined nationhood.

Thirdly, Hume opposes the use of violence. In his speeches, Hume continually highlights with great compassion the cost of violence to individuals routinely quoting statistics of death. He also notes other impacts, i.e. that violence "has cost us jobs" and that peace cannot be built on "the ruins of a shattered economy". There are other elements of practicality in his views on non-violence, that is, that republican violence distracted from the social injustices in the society and would "only strengthen Unionism".

Finally, he consistently speaks of reconciliation. Hume's view seems to start instrumentally concerning reconciliation, that is that Irish Unity is only possible through different traditions coming together. A United Ireland for Hume would be achieved not by overcoming "the Northern Protestant but to seek his help and cooperation". However, as his thinking develops, it is clear he becomes more committed to the principle of reconciliation at all costs. Hume sees the "road of reconciliation" as the only "real road forward".

At the core of these beliefs, however, is a profoundly pragmatic view of the world, not a rose-tinted idea of social harmony. Reconciliation for Hume is not only people-to-people relationship building. Hume sees reconciliation as needing institutional, political and social support. Hume noted in 1983 that many "furiously abhor the work of reconciliation" for this very reason. We know today, not only in Northern Ireland but globally, that some still see reconciliation negatively: a sop to the aggressors; a false coming together; selling out one's principles; or some idealistic peacenik concept. However, John Hume suggests we have no other choice than to foster reconciliation if we are, for better or worse, destined to share our society with others.

John Hume challenges us all to recognise that reconciliation is profoundly difficult and tricky yet at the heart of sustainable peace, noting in a speech at Dublin Castle in 1983: "Let that reconciliation start today in this room – between ourselves. Goodwill alone – and I know we have with us today the goodwill of the mass of the people of this island – will not suffice. We must apply all the resources of our collective intelligence, imagination, generosity and determination to this great enterprise and be seen to do it. We must mean business and we must be seen to desperately mean business".

To this end, as I reflect sadly today on the passing of John Hume, I am reminded of these weighty words and feel inspired to play my small part in upholding his legacy. I hope others with more political influence will use this moment to reflect and rise to the challenge. Rest in peace, John, and thank you for all the hard lessons you continue to teach us, and for the hope your words and deeds continue to convey.