

**A Reflection on the Legacy of John Hume**  
**By Brendan McAllister, 6 August, Hiroshima Day, 2020.**

The ancient Greeks conceived of time in two ways: 'kronos' referred to chronological or sequential time; 'kairos', on the other hand, signified an opportune moment. In biblical terms, 'kairos time' refers to particular moments when there is a right thing to say or do, a time of conversion and action.

It has often seemed to me that in Irish culture, at a wake or funeral, a family goes steps out of kronos time and into a kind of Kairos time. By tradition, in the home of the deceased, the clocks are stopped; the blinds are drawn; the family put on black and step out of the world for a couple of days. And into that house the neighbours and community come – friends and even enemies come. Stories are told and it is considered quite wrong to speak ill of the dead. So, the dead person is spoken of in positive terms. It becomes a time of reflection and appreciation.

Over these past days, it seemed as if, in the case of John Hume, people up and down the country entered Kairos time with the Hume family. There was some kind of pause in the air around us. Good things were said, even by people who had been his adversaries. And the media appeared to throw caution to the wind and eulogised the greatest hero of the peace we now enjoy.

In the spirit of Kairos, I want to reflect on where this peace came from and share my personal perception of the man now recognised as its chief architect.

In January 1974 I joined the SDLP. I was 17 years old. In May, the Ulster Workers Council strike brought down the power-sharing Executive that had been forged out of the Sunningdale Agreement and in which Hume was a minister. 'Anti-Agreement' unionist politicians lined up in front of jubilant thousands at Stormont and vowed never to share power with their nationalist neighbours or entertain institutional linkages to the rest of Ireland.

Later that year, I squeezed into a car with other party members from Newry and made one of my first trips to Belfast to attend the SDLP's fourth annual conference in the bombed and battered Europa Hotel. As a teenage political geek, I was as mesmerised as a rock fan on their first trip to Glastonbury. I marvelled at the quality of the speeches and the wide agenda stretching across the major social and economic concerns of the day, not just the constitutional and security issues. Here, before my eyes, were some of the best minds of the first generation to access third level education thanks to the 1947 Education Act. Most of the key players had professionally come of age in time to play leading roles in the civil rights campaign of the 1960s and now they were evolving into a formidable political class.

The SDLP was a coalition of political traditions and tendencies within the Catholic community: trades unionists, republicans, labourites, businesspeople, social democrats, nationalists. There were lots of teachers but there were also lawyers, accountants, doctors and a good number of tradesmen and manual workers. They were mostly men but there were numbers of women too.

The oratorical skills of Paddy O'Hanlon, Ivan Cooper and Austin Currie stand out in my memory. Our society was broken and still descending into violence but I felt myself to be in the middle of something powerful and vibrant.

The party leader, Gerry Fitt, M.P., was charismatic, hilariously funny at times and apparently crafty as an experienced operator with his own network of connections in Westminster. But when John Hume took to the podium it was as if everyone quietened down to hear what he had read from the political runes. He interpreted the signs of the times and had vision for how best to move forward. He certainly wasn't the only strategic thinker in the party but it was clear that the deputy leader had exceptional abilities. He was deep, pensive and creative. He could hold a room and turn a room with his analysis and force of argument.

He also had a camp of devoted followers from Derry; people who would follow him anywhere he thought they should go, no matter how dangerous.

However, the failure of power-sharing and the ensuing political stalemate took its toll. The Catholic community grew cynical about the capacity of Protestants to move over a little bit and share power. The northern state seemed beyond reform. The SDLP became more strongly nationalist in its outlook.

As the son and grandson of trades union men from the labour tradition, I was instinctively uncomfortable with the greening of the SDLP. As party leader, John Hume was a social democrat and his deputy, Seamus Mallon, was the custodian of nationalism. Mallon looked after the party's credentials within the Catholic community while Hume led the intellectual critique of the Northern state and developed a vision, at one point summed up in an election campaign slogan as 'a new north and a new Ireland'.

The SDLP engaged in a struggle on two fronts: with the siege mentality of unionism and the destructive mentality of republicanism.

In 1982, the party took a decision to fight elections but to boycott the new assembly because unionism had not shifted from its outright opposition to powersharing and any so-called 'Irish dimension' to political life here. Instead, Hume proposed what became the New Ireland Forum to enable nationalist parties north and south to come together and develop a common vision for a new Ireland. To my mind, it seemed that Hume was boycotting an orange assembly only to set up a rival, green assembly. In despair, I resigned from the party.

It seemed to me that Hume was leading the SDLP away from a broader, social democratic approach with greater cross-community appeal and moving onto the narrower ground of tribal nationalism.

However, with the benefit of hindsight and a bit more maturity, I have to say that I was wrong.

In my youth, I was unable to understand the lessons that Hume and others had learned from their years of being beaten off the streets and of sitting in smoke-filled rooms investing

political capital in one failed negotiation after another. Between 1973 and 1994 there were something like seven major political initiatives by successive British governments. With such entrenched conflict, new imagination and creativity were required. Hume had a number of important insights but I will highlight two.

Firstly, that there could never be a purely internal solution to the northern conflict. As Hume would say, a state with a permanently defined majority and a permanently defined minority was a failed state. The consent of both traditions was required to make the North viable and for consent to be forthcoming from the nationalist side, there would have to be institutional links to the rest of the island.

Secondly, that the task of forging a new peace agreement would have to be undertaken across a much broader, international canvas. Apart from London and even Dublin, the international community would have to be involved, most especially Washington and Brussels.

By the mid 1980s, a third important insight was added: that peace could not be made if those engaged in violence were excluded.

Each of these precepts were vehemently opposed by unionists and, in effect, undermined by the ongoing violent campaigns of republicans and loyalists.

The New Ireland Forum became an important mechanism to overhaul the southern political establishment's approach to Northern Ireland. It enabled new social, economic and cultural envisioning to take place. In a sense, Hume, along with Mallon and others, withdrew for a time to the intellectual hinterland of the nationalist tradition, but they did so in order to modernize it.

And in the years that followed they were greatly helped by a number of gifted Irish and British diplomats, with additional leverage from Irish American leaders whom Hume, during his many forays across the Atlantic, had persuaded to get involved.

With new energy coming out of Dublin, in 1985, unionism's siege mentality was irreparably punctured by the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which forged a new partnership between London and Dublin in managing the failed society of Northern Ireland. A purely internal solution would never again be entertained and London, in time, became more open to a more international approach.

By the late 1980s Hume had developed the core concepts which would underpin our peace: the three sets of relationships: partnership within Northern Ireland; North-South integration and East-West cooperation. Bearing in mind that Hume was a former seminarian, this reflects a Christian theology of peace: that all of life - all of creation- is relational, inter-connected and inter-dependent; that right relationships are the essence of peace.

In the 1980s John Hume entered a dialogue with Gerry Adams to end violence. Ending violence is a universal requirement for peacebuilding in situations of conflict around the world. However, while the Hume Adams dialogue was hugely important, his greatest

achievement was in discerning our peace formula (the three stranded relationships). The efficacy of the peace formula made it possible to take the gun out of Irish politics. For three decades the people of Northern Ireland suffered political breakdown; paramilitary violence and communal division. This mess was like a riddle that defied resolution. In struggling with that riddle over precious decades of his life, John Hume used his intellectual giftedness and his strength of spirit but pushed his mind to the point of exhaustion and brokenness.

His passing reminds us that the peace we now enjoy, while far from perfect, is indeed a precious gift. It is also a living thing that cannot stand still but must evolve. The question is whether this peace is maturing or mutating. Will those who are now the political custodians of our peace have the wisdom to facilitate and nurture its development or will they behave in ways that undermine the new civic norms that Hume and others fashioned for our times: replacing segregation with integration; domination with partnership; travelling out of our estrangements and into new relationships?

It is the DNA of our three-stranded peace formula that will be crucial in sustaining peace here. Our peace formula will also be crucial to our capacity to cope with the huge challenges of this century: Brexit, Covid 19 and, worst of all, the ecological crisis that is upon the people of Ireland, Great Britain and the whole planet.

Foremost among the prophetic voices of our time stands Pope Francis. In his encyclical on the ecological crisis, 'Laudato Sí', on care of our common home', he wrote:

" ... creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion."

This almost sounds like Hume-speak. Francis quotes Pope John Paul II:

"The Holy Spirit can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, including the most complex and inscrutable."

Like every other person of his generation, for a long time John Hume did not know how to loosen the knots of our troubled human affairs in this part of the world. What singles him out is that, more than any other political leader, he figured out how to do so. And when he figured it out, he spent years repeating the answer; spent years taking abuse and wearing himself out.

And almost like a bereaved family emerging from 'Kairos time' back into the daily grind of the world, we should be more conscious of his gift to us. We need to be more thankful for our peace and recommit ourselves to stop wasting the opportunities that have come with it and work together on the new and urgent challenges that we now face.

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