

SOLP

options for
a new Ireland

Conference
to Commemorate
the Bicentenary of
Grattans Parliament
1782

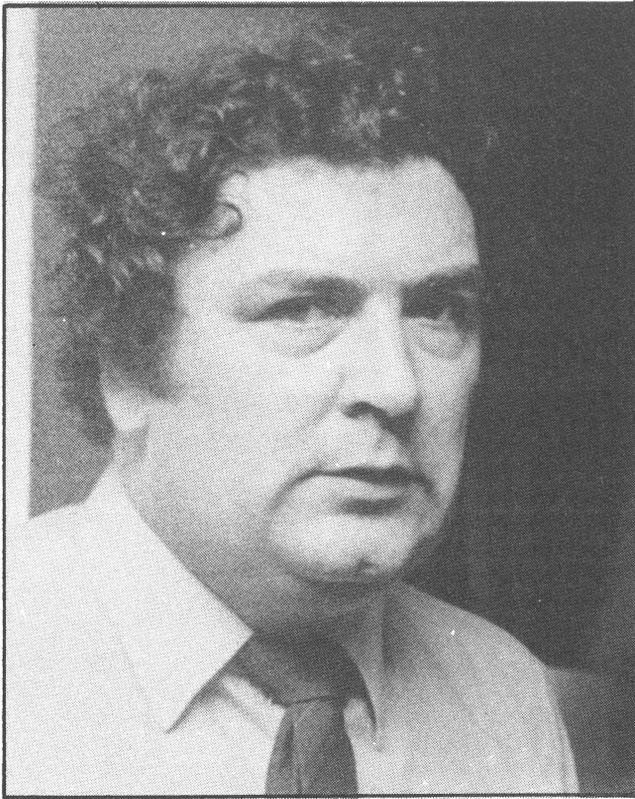
Belfast - Europa Hotel - 5th June, 1982

“A NEW IRELAND”

Speaker: **Mr. John Hume**

SDLP Party Leader

Ideas are more enduring and more powerful than swords or guns. The ideal of Ireland, the vision of patriotism that was the product of different strands of the Protestant intelligentsia in 18th century Ireland has been handed down to us as definitive Irish patriotism. Somewhere along the line, we, all of us have lost the spirit of generosity. Is it possible that we can meet the challenge of that vision and that one day soon we can echo Grattan's own words of 200 years ago "Spirit of Swift! Spirit of Molyneaux! Spirit of Grattan! Your genius has prevailed!"



Mr. John Hume, M.E.P.

The history of this island has been for centuries bleak and miserable. By and large those events which our extremists threaten never to allow us to forget, do little good in being remembered, Joyce was right to describe Irish History as a nightmare from which he wished to awaken.

Yet, the nightmare which continues today, for all the people of Northern Ireland has occasionally been relieved by an illumination of hope and light sufficient to recharge the batteries of the people with that grinding endurance which has sustained so many generations of the Irish of both traditions.

Such a source of hope was Henry Grattan. In fact, for brilliance, for generosity of mind, for passionate commitment and for sheer love of his country he has few if any, equals in our annals. He was also perhaps one of the wisest, the most far-seeing of all our great men. His convictions - the need for legislative freedom for Ireland, the need for equality of treatment for Catholics, the need to oppose both violence and coercion - were formed in his youth at his Uncle's house in Celbridge on the River Liffey. Many years later he wrote "Along the banks of that River amid the groves and bowers of Swift and Vanessa I grew convinced that I was right. Arguments unanswerable came to my mind and what I then proposed confirmed me in determination to persevere."

On the 17th April, 1780, he introduced his Declaration of Rights in the Irish House of Commons and successfully resisted a massive campaign of corruption organised by the administration which sought to suborn him and his

followers. His comment on those events is worth recording as an illustration of the consistent nature of Direct Rule and how well Grattan understood its fundamental weakness. "We were determined to refuse Office and our opinion and a just one, was that Office in Ireland was different from Office in England. It was not a situation held for Ireland but held for an English Government often in collusion with and frequently hostile to Ireland." How little things change!

The 16th April, 1782, was the greatest and happiest moment of his life, his Declaration of Rights was triumphantly passed. He ended his speech that day with an invocation of the great names of the Irish Protestant tradition of liberty "I found Ireland on her knees, I watched over her with an eternal solicitude, I have traced her progress from injuries to arms and from arms to liberty. Spirit of Swift! Spirit of Molyneux! Your genius has prevailed! Ireland is now a nation! In that character I hail her! And bowing in her august presence I say esto perpetua!"

Then followed as Grattan predicted it would, the most concentrated period of prosperity and artistic creativity that Ireland has ever known. Meanwhile the ideal of Republicanism inspired by France was spreading among the people of both traditions. It must be said that Grattan disapproved of the philosophy and deplored its violence.

He reserved his most trenchant condemnation however, for the savage methods of coercion employed by the government, which he really abhorred and regarded rightly, as a political disaster. He resigned his military commission as early as 1797 and his letter to his Commander, Lord Monck, could serve as a powerful comment on many of the tragic mistakes of the past twelve years. He wrote "It gives me great concern that the late determination of government with respect to the people of Ireland should have been against measures of conciliation and for measures of coercion and force. Such a determination makes it impossible for me to hold my military service however insignificant under a Government so disposed. If ever I am sent into actual service it shall never be against country".

The rising of 1798 was an event which filled Grattan with despair. Despite his political convictions he nevertheless saw the oppression which followed as a greater evil and he courageously challenged the administration when in the full flush of its brutality against the rebel Catholics and Protestants. He afterwards wrote of these events "the government were so abominable, their measures were so violent that no man could sanction them. There was High Treason certainly but these were measures that no High Treason, that no crimes could warrant. They did not treat the people like Christians, but like dogs. The question men should have asked was not Why was Mr Shears upon the gallows but Why was Lord Clare not along with him".

He returned on the theme of 1798 two years later in his speech on the Union. Again his penetrating wisdom and extraordinary generosity of mind overcame any bitterness he might understandably have felt towards the United Irishmen for undermining his historic achievement - the Legislative Autonomy of Ireland.

Grattan said "I think now as I thought then, that the treason of the Minister against the liberties of the people was infinitely worse than the rebellion of the people against the Minister".

Grattan died on the 4th June 1820, broken hearted, but by his dying breath still praying for the welfare of all the people of this island. It was forty years to the day after the Irish Volunteers had presented him an address for his assertion of the liberties of Ireland.

We were recently all of us advised that it is better to urge men to live up to their higher principles than to tell them how far they failed to live up to them. I would like to propose Grattan as a model to which we should all, Dublin, London and the leadership of both traditions in the North of Ireland aspire. He showed us what could be achieved not alone in terms of actual political success, but perhaps most significantly in terms of political generosity. While Tone and Davis, both Protestants, epitomised the Republican ideal - the insistence of breaking the connection with Britain - Grattan might serve as a meeting ground for Republicans on the one hand and on the other for those who like himself, esteemed the British connection but longed for liberty for all the people of Ireland, not just one section of the people.

Grattan was of the Protestant tradition, he expressed its deepest convictions - a commitment to civil and religious liberty, to freedom of conscience to liberty of the individual. The values were underlined and given powerful and emotive expression at one of the great and generous moments in Irish history and in Irish Protestant history in February 1782 when the Irish Volunteers, most of them Protestant, met in the Presbyterian Meeting House in Dungannon to resolve "That we hold the right of private judgement in matters of religion to be equally sacred in others as in ourselves". And that as men, and as Irishmen, as Christians and as Protestants we rejoice in the relaxation of the penal laws against our Roman Catholic fellow subjects."

These values - civil and religious liberty - have always been the declared basis of the Protestant tradition in Ireland. Is it legitimate to ask today what has happened to them in today's Ireland? Is it legitimate to suggest that there is a wide gulf between the attitudes of Dungannon and those of the Antrim hills today? Is it legitimate to ask where are the values of civil and religious liberty in the contemporary leadership of political Protestantism in Ireland? Is there indeed the slightest vestige of the fundamental Protestant values of civil and religious liberty? What has gone wrong?

It has been the consistent and laudable aim of Irish Protestants to maintain their distinctiveness and difference within Ireland. Ireland has need of diversity. However, it does seem to me that the central and consistent mistake of Irish Protestantism since the destruction of Grattan's dream in 1800 has been to seek, almost as its only means of protecting its distinctiveness, to concentrate all power exclusively in its own hands.

This was tragically wrong from the start, it was wrong in all the succeeding centuries, it was wrong although

perhaps most understandable when cultural and tribal exclusivity was sustained by the glories of an imperial Protestant power, and it is even more wrong today.

Exclusivity is an inherently destabilising factor in any society and it contains within itself all the seeds of communal disintegration and violence. It is in essence negative, a denial of liberty to others rather than an assertion of its own liberty, "no surrender", "not an inch", "Home rule is Rome rule". Paradoxically it is "ourselves alone" brought to its logical extremity.

Tragically it seems to me their exclusivism which is simply another word for Unionism has come to represent in communal terms in our society the inversion of those values that Protestantism preeminently epitomised in world culture - freedom of conscience, liberty of the individual, civil and religious freedoms.

The Protestant tradition did not in my view either consciously or strategically choose this path, they were given every encouragement to do so by a Britain which in the 18th and 19th centuries and in the first half of the 20th century had a political, economic and strategic interest in Ireland that was not necessarily as Grattan had warned a long term interest of any section of the people of Ireland. This encouragement to the Protestant tradition to have a separate and exclusive existence apart from the other tradition in Ireland was solidified in 1921 by the equation of sectarianism and power which became the motivating forces of Northern Ireland as an entity and which has set our people further apart with such tragic consequences. Britain today has little strategic, political or economic interest in north-east Ireland. The absence of that interest has led many in the Protestant community to question their will to sustain Northern Ireland. That questioning in itself has led to an intensification of insecurity among the majority population in Northern Ireland.

Today as in Grattan's day when the economic interests of this part of Ireland are clearly divergent from those of Britain is it not time for a re-examination by the Protestant tradition of where their interests really lie? We are not a community like Britain whose industrial relation problems have placed obstacles in the way of industrial development. Quite the contrary. Our industrial relations record is one of the best in Europe. We are not an economy in need of having "fat trimmed off".

Our traditional industries are already but skeletons of their former selves. In agriculture, our largest industry, we need, not a food policy as provided by Britain but an agricultural policy as demanded by our farmers and our economy.

A reappraisal of their vital interests leading to a new openness and a new arrangement between the different Irish traditions is neither a defeat nor a victory for anyone.

It is a recognition of the mutuality of our interests which transcend our difference and which in the end is the only way to finally release the enormous talents of both traditions in the constructive building of a country of which we can be proud rather than the destructive activity which shames us before the world.