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Ireland

A triumph of ideology: John Hume and the defeat of Irish Republicanism

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The flurry of commemoration by the great and the good following the death of John Hume can be summarised as follows: Hume was the leader of the Irish Civil Rights Movement, he advocated non violence and peace through negotiation and argued for a shared Ireland that included all political currents. Decades of work saw eventual recognition of his arguments, movement towards peace, the peace process and Good Friday Agreement and eventually the Nobel prize, a celebration choreographed by Bono, and recognition as a world statesman.

There is much distortion here. Hume was not a leader of the Civil Rights Association. Rather he was a conservative nationalist who marched within the loose federation that was the Civil Rights Movement. His response to the iconic October 5th march in 1968 attacked by the RUC, was to appear on the 6th of October with a newly formed Derry Citizens Action committee, formed in alliance with the Church and the Derry Traders Association to act as a restraining force on the radical mobilisation.

He was already active on social issues, but this was a gradualist movement with close links with the Catholic Church - a housing association, a Credit Union and a campaign for a University campus in Derry.

A new political movement was being born. The old Nationalist Party had fallen into decay and opposed any protest. The slogan of its leader, Eddie McAteer, was;

"Half a loaf is better than no bread"

Hume and the nascent Social Democratic and Labour Party had more of an 'Oliver Twist' approach that can be summed up as;

"Please sir, can we have some more?"

As with the Nationalist Party, they were willing to operate within the confines set by the Orange state. Where the Nationalist party were content to receive favours for the middle class and the Church, the new nationalists wanted a place at the table and a share of political power.

So the voice of John Hume was the voice of conservative nationalism, of the Catholic Church and of the Catholic business class. Later this voice was sponsored by Irish capitalism as a whole and, following US supported academic studies in America, it was the local voice of the Irish-American lobby inside the Democratic Party.

The ideology that emerged was intoned ad infinitum in what became known satirically as 'the single transferable speech'.

Imperialism, sectarianism and class oppression were restated as cultural misunderstanding. Border watchtowers, troops, guns, tanks, all the material aspects of oppression counted for nothing - it was the divisions in people's hearts that had to be addressed. We should ignore the physical reality of

British occupation and partition and focus on unionist perceptions. Moderation was the key. John Hume credited Gandhi with the saying;

"An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind".

He never dealt with the inverse; passive acceptance leaves the oppressed blind and the oppressors in full possession of their faculties.

Hume was no great speaker, tending towards monotone in interview. It is argued that he managed to win the day by constant repetition until he eventually won over his opponents.

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That's not the case. There was a bloody struggle in which thousands died. The British employed military repression and used loyalist killers to wage a war of terror. This combined with a resistance that focused in on militarism rather than linking to class politics led to defeat.

Throughout this period Hume and the SDLP consistently supported British institutions. Formal opposition to British violence ran alongside bitter condemnation of Republican violence. In a long nationalist tradition of acting as recruiting sergeants they supported the formation of an Ulster Defence Regiment to replace the notorious "B" Specials, earning the nickname of stoops - the Stoop Down Low Party.

It was not Hume's speech that changed, but the environment in which it was delivered. The defeat of the Republican hunger strikers and the collapse of Republican strategy led to a sharp shift to the right and to the Provisionals adopting the constitutionalist nationalist ideology of Hume. This is his singular triumph: the conversion of a defeated Republicanism.

Hume's ideology serves to explain events rather than to have driven them. His arguments did not lead to the current settlement but merely served to explain it. Much of the show was simply window dressing. The Nobel Peace Prize with unionist leader Trimble, the dance on the stage choreographed by the obnoxious Bono, all took centre stage when the real deal in the background was between London and Dublin, supported by the USA. The bit actors were retired, with Adams taking over from Hume and Sinn Fein taking over from the SDLP as the voice of a chastened nationalism.

John Hume's later years were sad and dogged by serious illness. In his final moments he was not well served by his friends. The torrent of adulation from people like Blair and Clinton leaves a nasty taste in the mouth, as does the sugary praise of Sinn Fein. Comparisons with Gandhi, Mandela and Martin Luther King are particularly obnoxious. These people suffered serious violence and oppression at the hands of the state and advanced the cause of the oppressed. John Hume was early on recognised as the voice of 'reason' and treated with deference by the British. Protests and threats came from his own constituents, unhappy with his representation of their struggle.

Perhaps the most honest assessment was from former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar:

"Today, we mourn the passing of one of Ireland's greatest ever sons. He ranks alongside O'Connell and Parnell in the pantheon of Ireland's great leaders".

This is the pantheon that John Hume can be associated with - representatives of constitutional Irish capitalism in contradiction to its long revolutionary history.

John Hume's victory is echoed in the fervent praise of former opponents won over to his ideology. He would, I believe, be content to be given credit for today's Ireland - a "shared" Ireland where an Irish democracy is indefinitely postponed. Little has changed in the life chances of the working class in Belfast and Derry, but the middle classes reek of self satisfaction at their place in the sun.

The permanence of Hume's legacy depends heavily on the permanence of the peace settlement - a structure that after decades has yet to demonstrate any stability.

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