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Nobel Peace Prize - Acceptance Speech by Mr. David Trimble, 10 December 1998

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The following is the full text of Mr David Trimble's Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, delivered in Oslo, 10 December 1998.

YOUR Majesties, Members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. The Nobel Prize for peace normally goes to named persons. This year the persons named are John Hume and myself, two politicians from Northern Ireland. And I am honoured, as John Hume is honoured, that my name should be so singled out.

But in one sense the singling of one or two persons, for a peace prize, must always seem something of an injustice. In Northern Ireland I could name scores of people, unionist and nationalist, who deserve this prize as well. Add to that the thousands of people who I do not know but who have borne witness in their own lives, by carrying out what Wordsworth called "those little nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love".

And since I know there are thousands of such heroes and heroines in Northern Ireland, how many more millions of peacemakers must there be in the front line of the fight for peace across the globe. People who stand in the front line for peace in all the places where there is no peace - Bosnia, Kosovo, Gaza, Cyprus, Rwanda, Angola.

Naturally it is not possible to name each and every one of those heroes and heroines who make up the huge host of peacemakers who, even as we speak, are at work for peace around the world. But even if it is not possible to name them we can note their presence on the peace-lines around the world. Having said that, I am at the same time, anxious to allay any fears on your part that I might fail to pick up the medal or the cheque. The people of Northern Ireland are not a people to look a gift horse in the mouth. It is imperative that I take the medal home to Northern Ireland - if only to prove that I have been to Oslo. And the way politics work in Northern Ireland - if John Hume has a medal, it is important that I have one too.

It is a truth universally understood that there is no such thing as a free lunch. That being so, John and I are obliged to sing for our supper. In short, some expect us to speak as experts and hand out advice on how to make peace. Some old hands say that there are two ways to sing for your supper. The first and the safest course, they say, is to make a series of vague and visionary statements. Indeed, are not vague and visionary statements much the same thing? The tradition from which I come, but by which I am not confined, produced the first vernacular Bible in the language of the common people, and contributed much to the

scientific language of the enlightenment. It puts a great price on the precise use of words, and uses them with circumspection, so much so that our passion for precision is often confused with an indifference to idealism.

Not so. But I am personally and perhaps culturally conditioned to be sceptical of speeches which are full of sound and fury, idealistic in intention, but impossible of implementation; and I resist the kind of rhetoric which substitutes vapour for vision. Instinctively, I identify with the person who said that when he heard a politician talk of his vision, he recommended him to consult an optician. But, if you want to hear of a possible Northern Ireland - not a Utopia but a normal and decent society, flawed as human beings are flawed but fair as human beings are fair, then I hope not to disappoint you.

The second suggestion is that either John or I, or indeed both of us, might explicate at some little length, like peace scientists so to speak, on any lessons learnt in the little laboratory of Northern Ireland, as if we were scientists and the people were so much mice.

Speaking for myself, there are two good reasons to reject this course. First, I am not sure that I hold the status of scientist in the political laboratory of Northern Ireland. Indeed, there have been days, particularly recently, when I have felt much less like the scientist and very much more like the mouse!

Secondly, I have, in fact, some fairly serious reservations about the merits of using any conflict, not least Northern Ireland, as a model for the study, never mind the solution, of other conflicts. In fact, if anything, the opposite is true. Let me spell this out.

I believe that a sense of the unique, specific and concrete circumstances of any situation is the first indispensable step to solving the problems posed by that situation. Now, I wish I could say that that insight was my own. But that insight into the central role of concrete and specific circumstance is the bedrock of the political thought of a man who is universally recognised as one of the most eminent philosophers of practical politics. I refer, of course to the eminent 18th century Irish political philosopher, and brilliant British parliamentarian, Edmund Burke.

He was the most powerful and prophetic political intellect of that century. He anticipated and welcomed the American revolution. He anticipated the dark side of the French revolution. He delved deep into the roots of that political violence, based on the false notion of the perfectibility of man, which has plagued us since the French revolution. He is claimed by both conservatives and liberals. He can be claimed by Britain and Ireland, by Catholic and Protestant, and indeed by the world. For Burke's belief in the rule of law and in parliamentary democracy is not our monopoly but the birthright of men and women of all countries, all colours and all creeds.

But of course he has special significance for us in Ireland. Burke, the son of a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, was a man who in word and in deed honoured both religious traditions, recognised and respected his Irish roots and the British parliamentary system which nursed him to the full flowering of his genius. Today as we seek to decommission not only arms and ammunition, but also hearts and minds, Burke provides us not only with a powerful role model of the pluralist Irishman, but also with a powerful role model for politicians everywhere. Burke is the best model for what might be called politicians of the possible - politicians who seek to make a working peace, not in some perfect world that never was, but in this, the flawed world which is our only workshop. Because he is the philosopher of practical politics, not of visionary vapours, because his beliefs correspond to empirical experience, he may be a good general guide to the practical politics of

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peacemaking.

I shall also be calling on two other philosophers, Amos Oz, the distinguished Israeli writer who has reached out to the Arab tradition, and George Kennan, the former US ambassador to the Soviet Union, who laid the cornerstone of post-war US foreign policy. All three, Burke, Oz and Kennan, are particularly acute about the problems of dealing with revolutionary violence - that political, religious and racial terrorism that comes from the pursuit of what Burke called abstract virtue, the urge to make men perfect against their will.

Now these negative notes do not mean I have not good news at the end. I do. But, it would be a dereliction of duty if I only conjured up good and generous ghosts, and failed to specify the spectres at the feast.

There are fascist forces in this world. The first step to their defeat is to define them. Let me now, with the help of Burke, Oz and Kennan, locate the dark fountain of fascism from which flows most of the political, religious and racial violence which pollutes the progressive achievements of humanity.

Burke believed that the source of the pollution is the Platonic pursuit of abstract perfection, the passion to change other people's personal, political, religious or economic views by political violence. I say Platonic because that savage pursuit of abstract perfection starts in the western world with Plato's Republic. It rises to a plateau with the French and Russian revolutions. It descended to new depths with the Nazis and is present in all the national, ethnic and religious conflicts current after the collapse of communism, itself the most determined and ruthless Platonic experiment in perfecting the economic system whatever the cost in human life.

Burke challenged the Platonic perfectibility doctrine whose principal protagonist was Rousseau. Rousseau regarded man as perfect and society as corrupt. Burke believed man was flawed and that society was redemptive. The revolution tested these theories and it was Burke's that proved the most progressive in terms of practical politics. He has a horror of abstract notions. In 1781 he said "Abstract liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found." Seven years later he opposed the revolution, correctly predicting that the mob would be replaced by a cabal, and the cabal by a dictator. At the end of Rousseau's road, Burke predicted, we would find not the perfectibility of man but the gibbet and the guillotine. And so it proved. And so it proved when Stalin set out to perfect the new Soviet man. So it proved with Mao in China and Pol Pot in Cambodia. So it will prove in every conflict when perfection is sought at the point of a gun.

Amos Oz has also arrived at the same conclusion. Recently in a radio programme he was asked to define a political fanatic. He did so as follows. "A political fanatic," he said, "is someone who is more interested in you than in himself." At first that might seem as an altruist, but look closer and you will see the terrorist. A political fanatic is not someone who wants to perfect himself. No, he wants to perfect you. He wants to perfect you personally, to perfect you politically, to perfect you religiously, or racially, or geographically. He wants you to change your mind, your government, your borders. He may not be able to change your race, so he will eliminate you from the perfect equation in his mind by eliminating you from the earth. "The Jacobins," said Burke, "had little time for the imperfect."

We in Northern Ireland are not free from taint. We have a few fanatics who dream of forcing the Ulster British people into a Utopian Irish state, more ideologically Irish than its own inhabitants actually want. We also have fanatics who dream of permanently suppressing northern nationalists in a state more supposedly British than its inhabitants actually want.

But a few fanatics are not a fundamental problem. No, the problem arises if political fanatics bury themselves within a morally legitimate political movement. Then there is a double danger. The first is that we might dismiss legitimate claims for reform because of the barbarism of terrorist groups bent on revolution. In that situation experience would suggest that the best way forward is for democrats to carry out what the Irish writer Eoghan Harris calls acts of good authority. That is acts addressed to their own side.

Thus each reformist group has a moral obligation to deal with its own fanatics. The Serbian democrats must take on the Serbian fascists. The PLO must take on Hamas. In Northern Ireland, constitutional nationalists must take on republican dissident terrorists and constitutional unionists must confront Protestant terrorists.

There is a second danger. Sometimes in our search for a solution, we go into denial about the darker side of the fanatic, the darker side of human nature. Not all may agree, but we cannot ignore the existence of evil. Particularly that form of political evil that wants to perfect a person, a border at any cost. It has many faces. Some look suspiciously like the leaders of the Serbian forces wanted for massacres such as that at Srebrenica, some like those wielding absolute power in Baghdad, some like those wanted for the Omagh bombing. It worries me that there is an appeasing strand in western politics. Sometimes it is a hope that things are not as bad as all that. Sometimes it is a hope that people can be weaned away from terror. What we need is George Kennan's hardheaded advice to the State Department in the 1960s for dealing with the state terrorists of his time, based on his years in Moscow. "Don't act chummy with them; don't assume a community of aims with them which does not really exist; don't make fatuous gestures of good will."

Let me comment on those clear words to those who sometimes seem to think that dealing with fascists is merely a game where one won't get hurt. My philosophers are also guides as to how best to battle against these dark forces. Here we come again to Burke's belief that politics proceeds not by some abstract notions or by simple appeal to the past, but by close attention to the concrete detail and circumstance of the current specific situation.

"Circumstances," says Burke, "give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind."

That is the nub of the matter. True, I am sure, of other conflicts. Previous precedents must not blind negotiators to the current circumstances. This first step away from abstraction and towards reality should be followed by giving space for the possibilities for progress to develop. That is what I have tried to do: to tell unionists to give things a chance to develop. Given that the Ulster British people are coming out of the experience of 25 years of "armed struggle" directed against them they have given our appeals a generous hearing. Critics say that concessions are a sign of weakness. Burke, however says, "Magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom; and a great empire and little minds go ill together." Prophetic words when we think of the history of the British Empire. And we are the inheritors of that intellectual tradition that encourages us to identify with the cultural alliance of the English-speaking peoples and share their political interests.

But the realisation of peace needs more than magnanimity. It requires a certain political prudence, and a willingness at times not to be too precise or pedantic. Burke says, "It is the nature of greatness not to be exact." Amos Oz agrees, "Inconsistency is the basis of coexistence. The heroes of tragedy, driven by consistency and by righteousness, destroy each other. He who seeks total supreme justice seeks death." Again the warning not to aim for abstract perfection. Heaven knows, in Ulster, what I have looked for is a peace within

the realms of the possible. We could only have started from where we actually were, not from where we would have liked to be.

And we have started. And we will go on. And we will go on all the better if we walk, rather than run. If we put aside fantasy and accept the flawed nature of human enterprises. Sometimes we will stumble, maybe even go back a bit. But this need not matter if in the spirit of an old Irish proverb we say to ourselves "Tomorrow is another day."

In not seeking perfection beyond the power of flawed man we are acting not just within the Burkean tradition but within the broad religious consensus. Nor is this a pessimistic approach. It is one that obliges us to do our best. Because politics is not an exact science but partakes of human nature within the contingent circumstances of the moment I have not pressed the paramilitaries on the details of decommissioning. Although I am under pressure from my own political community I have not insisted on precise dates, quantities and manner of decommissioning. All I have asked for is a credible beginning. All I have asked for is that they say that the "war" is over. And that is proved by such a beginning. That is not too much to ask for. Nor is it too much to ask that the reformist party of nationalism, the SDLP, support me in this.

But common sense dictates that I cannot for ever convince society that real peace is at hand if there is not a beginning to the decommissioning of weapons as an earnest of the decommissioning of hearts that must follow. Any further delay will reinforce dark doubts about whether Sinn Féin are drinking from the clear stream of democracy, or still drinking from the dark stream of fascism. It cannot forever face both ways. Plenty of space has been given to the paramilitaries. Now, winter is here, and there is still no sign of spring. Like John Bunyan's Pilgrim, we politicians have been through the Slough of Despond. We have seen Doubting Castle, the owner whereof was Giant Despair. I can certainly recall passing many times through the Valley of Humiliation. And all too often we have encountered, not only on the other side, but on our own side too "the man who could look no way but downwards, with a muckrake in his hand".

Nevertheless, like one of Beckett's characters "I will go on, because I must go on." What we democratic politicians want in Northern Ireland is not some utopian society but a normal society. The best way to secure that normalcy is the tried and trusted method of parliamentary democracy. So the Northern Ireland Assembly is the primary institutional instrument for the development of a normal society in Northern Ireland. Like any parliament it needs to be more than a cockpit for competing victimisations. Burke said it best: "Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and an advocate, against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where not local purposes, nor local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good resulting from the general reason of the whole."

Some critics complain that I lack "the vision thing". But vision in its pure meaning is clear sight. That does not mean I have no dreams. I do. But I try to have them at night. By day I am satisfied if I can see the furthest limit of what is possible. Politics can be likened to driving at night over unfamiliar hills and mountains. Close attention must be paid to what the beam can reach and the next bend. Driving by day, as I believe we are now doing, we should drive steadily, not recklessly, studying the countryside ahead, with judicious glances in the mirror. We should be encouraged by having come so far, and face into the next hill, rather than the mountain beyond. It is not that the mountain is not in my mind, but the hill has to be climbed first.

There are hills in Northern Ireland and there are mountains. The hills are decommissioning and policing. But the mountain, if we could but see it clearly, is not in front of us but behind us, in history. The dark shadow we seem to see in the distance is not really a mountain ahead, but the shadow of the mountain behind - a shadow from the past thrown forward into our future. It is a dark sludge of historical sectarianism. We can leave it behind us if we wish. But both communities must leave it behind, because both created it. Each thought it had good reason to fear the other. As Namier says, the irrational is not necessarily unreasonable. Ulster Unionists, fearful of being isolated on the island, built a solid house, but it was a cold house for Catholics. And northern nationalists, although they had a roof over their heads, seemed to us as if they meant to burn the house down.

None of us are entirely innocent. But thanks to our strong sense of civil society, thanks to our religious recognition that none of us are perfect, thanks to the thousands of people from both sides who made countless acts of good authority, thanks to a tradition of parliamentary democracy which meant that paramilitarism never displaced politics, thanks to all these specific, concrete circumstances we, thank God, stopped short of that abyss that engulfed Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia and Rwanda.

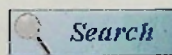
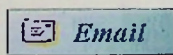
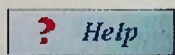
Thank you for this prize for peace. We have a peace of sorts in Northern Ireland. But it is still something of an armed peace. It may seem strange that we receive the reward of a race run while the race is still not quite finished. But the paramilitaries are finished. But politics is not finished. It is the bedrock to which all societies return. Because we are the only agents of change who accept man as he is and not as someone else wants him to be. The work we do may be grubby and without glamour. But it has one saving grace. It is grounded on reality and reason. What is the nature of that reason? Let Burke answer: "Political reason is computing principle: adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing, morally - and not metaphysically or mathematically - true moral denominations."

There are two traditions in Northern Ireland. There are two main religious denominations. But there is only one true moral denomination. And it wants peace.

I am happy and honoured to accept this prize on my own behalf. I am happy and honoured to accept this prize on behalf of all the people of Northern Ireland. I am happy and honoured to accept the prize on behalf of all the peacemakers from throughout the British Isles and farther afield who made the Belfast Agreement that Good Friday at Stormont.

That agreement showed that the people of Northern Ireland are no petty people. They did good work that day. And tomorrow is now another day.

Thank you.



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