



New Ireland Commission

COMMENTARY - “SHAPING THE FUTURE” - FIVE CONTEMPORARY CONTRIBUTIONS BY SDLP LEADER COLUM EASTWOOD MP

This submission reproduces five commentaries and contributions from SDLP Leader Colum Eastwood MP. Each was published or reported in late 2020 or early 2021 namely:

- “A big burden to get it right.” ”THE IRISH NEWS” 19th November 2020
- “John Hume gave us the tools to create a new society.” “THE JOURNAL” 24th December 2020
- “It is my firm belief.” HANSARD HOUSE OF COMMONS 30 December 2020
- “Seamus Mallon’s offer is always on the table.” “THE IRISH TIMES” Monday 25th January 2021
- “We are all connected, one way or the other.” “THE BANGOR SPECTATOR” 30th January 2021

EMERGING CHALLENGES

In these contributions Colum Eastwood details a number of themes and emerging challenges against which we shall be judged and should judge ourselves:

- **PARTNERSHIP** “John Hume demonstrated “solutions and partnerships were possible and that even the greatest obstacles could be overcome.”
- **OUR GENERATION** “A New Ireland that takes on the challenges of a new century....now falls to our generation of leaders.”
- **THE 3 STRANDS** “The 3 strands of relationships remain a template of genuine genius and, if utilised, its structures and original ethos still have the potential to push us through and beyond the turbulence of our political present.”
- **EUROPE** “Our relationships with Europe was a powerful reminder of the potential of reconciliation...but also a path to greater economic opportunity.”
- **DIALOGUE** ”Over the last months the SDLP has been conducting hours of quiet conversations with people across this island from a range of backgrounds. In the months ahead we will hold 100’s more conversations with every community, sector and generationwe need to conduct the conversation with c, compassion and conviction.”
- **BUILD CONSENSUS and CONSENT** “Seeking to build a consensus about how we can shape a new society and a new country that meets the aspirations of all our people ...a live conversation about our future is happening...a unionist vote can’t count more than a nationalist vote.”
- **THE OFFER** As Seamus Mallon appealed 35 years ago so too now “Come and build with us. Say yes. The offer will always be on the table. A big challenge for Dublin and the Irish state.”
- **TWO PROSPECTUS** “Any future referendum isn’t a YES or NO to a United Ireland, its about promoting our prospectus for a New Ireland, a different kind of country, and unionism version of what continuing in the UK would mean.”
- **CHANGE** “Winning..... has to mean a societal change. A country that people get excited about particularly young people modern, outward-looking, liberal, pro-European, economically sound.”

• **A FIRM VIEW** “My firm view is that the UK is coming to an end. I say this in the full understanding that many in my community will see the break-up of the Union as a tragedy and I respect that...(so) speaking about the end of the Union is not said in a tone of thoughtless triumphalism.”

• **OTHERS** “Our New Ireland will not be built on the rubble of our past....with a rash rush to a referendum.... want to also say - look where the DUP has led you and Look where London has left you.”

“A big burden to get it right.” ”THE IRISH NEWS” 19th November 2020

As Colum Eastwood marks five years as SDLP leader he tells political correspondent John Manley about the challenges of creating a new Ireland and dealing with instability in the Stormont institutions and beyond.

When Colum Eastwood succeeded Alasdair McDonnell as leader of the SDLP five years ago, many suspected the then 32-year-old was naive, and that despite a youthful energy, his ambitious project of change would falter.

The party was 17 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, its political highpoint, and in the intervening years had been steadily sliding electorally, eclipsed by Sinn Féin as the voice of northern nationalism.

The political stability he hoped for as he assumed the leader’s role failed to materialise as he was plunged in what has been an almost unrelenting cycle of elections and political upheaval. There has been an EU referendum, Stormont’s collapse, a local government election, two assembly elections, and two Westminster elections, the first of which in 2017 saw the SDLP lose its three MPs, all of them previous party leaders. It was a bleak scenario and by Mr Eastwood’s own admission an “existential crisis” for the party that turned 50 this year.

The SDLP maybe needed to hit rock bottom before its fortunes changed but last December saw the party experience its first upturn in a Westminster election for more than two decades, securing two seats in Foyle, his own constituency and for Claire Hanna in South Belfast.

It has put a spring not only in the party leader’s step but across the SDLP ranks. It lost three of its leading figures in the past 12 months – Seamus Mallon, John Dallat and John Hume – but the talk is not of a curtain call but of rejuvenation instead.

Speaking to The Irish News from Westminster, the Foyle MP is keen to stress the presence of new blood, a trend he insists will be reinforced at the next assembly election, scheduled for little over 18 months’ time.

“I think we’ve shown people we are back in the game,” he says.

“This year has been a time to reflect on the party’s legacy but it’s now time to talk about the future and the next generation.”

He argues that the current circumstances, destabilising as they are at times, offer “massive opportunities” to advance the nationalist cause. However, with that comes a “fairly big burden on those of us that want to change to get it right”.

The SDLP leader remains consistent in his opposition to a border poll in the short-to-medium term: “Don’t obsess about the date, obsess about winning and how you actually do that.

“Winning has to mean so much more than a referendum – it has to mean a societal change and that means you have to create a vision for the future and a country that people can get excited about, particularly young people.”

He argues that unionism “will get clever one of these days” and back calls for a border poll.

“The cleverest unionist strategist of the past 30 years, Peter Robinson, says ‘let’s get it done and let’s not have one for another generation’.

“That’s smart – and what does it tell you? – we’re not in a position to win yet.”

What the SDLP leader does reject is any notion of weighted unionist consent in a border poll, as articulated by the party's late former deputy leader Seamus Mallon.

"A unionist vote can't count more than a nationalist vote – it's totally impractical," he says. The SDLP leader's pitch is aimed at the north's expanding 'middle ground', those who "aren't dyed in the wool nationalists or unionists". He says his party can learn from this demographic about "the language required to convince people".

"I'm always going to vote for constitutional change but then I'm not the person who's going to decide this – the people in the middle will decide this, a new generation."

The SDLP must therefore be "modern, outward-looking, liberal, pro-European, exciting and economically sound" – a transformation he believes the party has undergone during the past five years.

One of the first steps in delivering his "vision for the future" is the Taoiseach Micheál Martin's Shared Island Unit, the product of a "number of years" of discussions between the two leaders, which has the SDLP's fingerprints all over it. While significant, it is arguably the only tangible outworking of the "policy partnership" announced with Fianna Fáil last year.

"The Irish government had to step into that space, as it's best placed to manage and lead the conversation that is growing organically," Mr Eastwood says.

In the coming weeks, the SDLP will formally launch its New Ireland Commission, a two-fold initiative that will look at the "practical work of integrating the health service, the economy and all the different policy aspects", while "most importantly" also initiating engagement with people from the unionist tradition.

"There will be those (unionists) who will engage very publicly and those who will engage almost secretly.

"I think political unionism should begin to engage – though I don't think they will in a large part early on."

The SDLP leader argues that unionism too should set out its vision for the future.

"As it's envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement, any future referendum isn't a 'yes' or a 'no' to a united Ireland, it's about presenting our prospectus for a new Ireland, a different kind of country, and unionism's version of what continuing involvement in UK would mean – and of course, that's a shifting phenomenon as well.

"It's a about two competing narratives but we can compete in a democratic discussion rather than a violent and aggressive way – that's where politics is going whether we want it or not."

The emphasis of the conversation, according to the Foyle MP, must be on the future rather than "righting wrongs and settling old grievances". He also stresses that it will be a "big challenge for Dublin and the Irish state", including the drafting of a new constitution.

Mr Eastwood also sees no contradiction in working the northern institutions effectively while pursuing the long-term goal of unification. He argues that if the north is seen as a "basket case" it will only encourage southern voters to reject reunification.

Stormont needs to return to the "principles of cooperation", he says.

"You can build the most perfect institutions in the world for power-sharing but problems arise when you don't work them in the spirit that was intended."

The SDLP leader concedes that the institutions at present are widely viewed as a "laughing stock"

but that the party's sole minister Nichola Mallon "won't be leaving the executive in the middle of a pandemic".

"Despite all the talk, we've gone straight back into the status quo with the SDLP, Alliance and UUP all badly treated.

"We're not afraid of going into opposition – we've done it before – but we have a responsibility to people and won't be bullied out of government."

“John Hume gave us the tools to create a new society.”

“THE JOURNAL” 24th December 2020

This has been an incredibly difficult year for people and families the length and breadth of our island. We have all shared in immense sacrifices to protect our friends, family and neighbours in the face of a pandemic which has taken a terrible toll on us all.

It has been a particularly difficult year for the SDLP family. The death of Seamus Mallon in January and John Hume in July represented the loss of two of 20th century Ireland’s most significant and consequential political figures.

It has been an immense source of comfort to all of us that the loss of the architects of peace in Ireland was felt far beyond their own communities in Markethill and Derry, and far beyond our party.

These were moments of mourning, and solemn reflection, for our whole island. That is an enduring testament to their lives’ work and the special place that each holds in Ireland’s memory.

Hume, in particular, will always find a home amongst the pantheon of great Irish leaders and it is only right and natural that he is now spoken of in the same breath as O’Connell and Parnell.

It is important that John’s endeavours are fully appreciated in terms of their sheer scale – his impact and legacy extends well beyond one lifetime and well beyond the confines of Northern Ireland.

His life’s work brought to an end the seemingly intractable historical arc of bitter conflict between the neighbouring islands of Britain and Ireland.

After some 800 years which inflicted so much hurt and harm on all our peoples, it is John Hume who will now be remembered as the great healer of that history. For all of these reasons and more, John Hume truly was Ireland’s greatest.

Through the power of John’s truly European imagination, through the depth of his language, he proved that solutions and partnerships were possible and that even the greatest obstacles could be overcome.

The three strands of relationships, amongst and between the islands of Britain and Ireland, remains a template of genuine genius and, if utilised, its structures and original ethos still hold the potential to guide us through and beyond the turbulence of our political present.

As part of his single transferrable speech, John often mentioned one of his early visits to the European Parliament.

On a walk across the Pont de l’Europe, a bridge that connects Strasbourg in France and Kehl in Germany, he stopped and thought about the decades of bloodshed and millions of lives that had been lost in wars between the people of Europe.

And he mused that had he stood in that spot 30 years earlier with a vision for a European continent at peace, working together in the substantial common interests of the people of all its nations – he might have been sent to see a psychiatrist. But it happened. And it became a central pillar of his vision for peace in Ireland.

As we approach the end of the transition period, I have no doubt that John would have been heartbroken that our people and our peace have been relegated to a secondary consideration in a game that the British Government is playing with Europe.

He understood that our relationship with Europe was a powerful reminder of the potential of reconciliation between communities in conflict but it also provided a path to greater economic prosperity.

John wanted us to wage war on poverty and want, to reach out to the marginalised and the \dispossessed, and that by setting ourselves to the challenge of creating a fairer, more equal society, that we would undo decades of mistrust between our people. All of that is jeopardised by the situation we find ourselves in.

Hume once summed up his political philosophy in saying, 'I never thought in terms of being a leader. I thought very simply in terms of helping people.' The simplicity of that statement remains a powerful insight into the patriotic devotion that came to define the man. It's a philosophy that we should all recommit ourselves to now.

It is no exaggeration to say that each and every one of us now live in the Ireland John imagined – an island at peace and free to decide its own destiny. We were given the tools to create a new society – one that addresses the legacy of our past but is unbound from the politics of conflict.

A new Ireland that takes on the big challenges of a new century. That task, to fulfil Hume's ambitions for our island and set out our own vision for the future, now falls to our generation of leaders. That's our shared responsibility and we're committed to putting in the hard yards to make it happen.

“It is my firm belief.” HANSARD HOUSE OF COMMONS 30 December 2020

At the outset, I thank the Irish Government and Michel Barnier for standing up for the Good Friday agreement and the people of Northern Ireland when others refused to do it. The majority of people in Northern Ireland, of course, voted to reject leaving the European Union and they still reject it today. This Boris Johnson deal does not address the core problem with Brexit for us. We have chosen a different path from the one driven by English nationalism. While we welcome the fact that a no-deal outcome has been avoided, we have absolutely no intention of giving our consent or endorsement to an outcome that will make people poorer. This is the first example of a trade deal in modern history that actually puts up barriers to trade. The protocol protects us from a hard border in Ireland—yes it does—but this deal still will damage our economy, our society and our public services in a range of areas. Whether it is on services, roaming or policing and justice, this deal puts us in a far worse place than we are in right now, and I, for one, refuse to apologise for voting against it. Our position has remained consistent throughout.

My firm view now is that the United Kingdom is coming to an end. I say this in the full understanding that many in my community will see the break-up of the Union as a tragedy, and I fully respect that position. Just because I believe that the Union is ending does not mean I say it in a tone of thoughtless triumphalism. It instead places a solemn responsibility on us to manage the relationships across these islands. Our scarred history places a moral duty upon us. We need to conduct the coming conversation with patience, care and compassion. The prize is to build a shared homeplace for all our people, but a new Ireland will not be built upon the rubble of our past, and I want to appeal to some of my fellow nationalists: there is no future in glorifying the ugliness of our past. Stop pretending that murdering unarmed farmers up country lanes was somehow heroic. There is no future worth having to be built upon that narrative.

To my Unionist neighbours, I want to say this: look at where the DUP has led you and look at where London has left you. It is my firm conviction that we can build a new society together—one built on mutual respect, which recognises and celebrates all our rich traditions. We in the SDLP will remain true to that proud heritage. We will be patient and generous, but we will also be honest about our view of the unfolding constitutional realities. Young people everywhere rejected Brexit. Thankfully, in Northern Ireland, young people will have a choice again. They will be able to choose a European future again. They will be able to choose an open, liberal and modern future, which is a prize worth fighting for.

“Seamus Mallon’s offer is always on the table.” “THE IRISH TIMES” Monday 25th January 2021

On a bitterly cold morning last January, former taoisigh, heads of government, ministers and senior politicians from parties across these islands travelled to rural Mullaghbrack in Co Armagh to pay their respects following the passing of one of modern Ireland’s most consequential figures. Seamus Mallon was a force of nature.

And as mourners made their way to St James’s Church, along the winding lanes of Mallon country, they must have been struck by Seamus’s famously wicked sense of humour. A former deputy first minister, MP, senator and deputy leader of the SDLP, Seamus could have filled Armagh Cathedral several times over with people wanting to say a final goodbye to a man who helped shape our country and shape their lives for the better.

Instead, however, he chose possibly the smallest rural church in Ireland, with half of the space reserved for parishioners, compelling us all to see the places and meet the people he grew up with.

The organisers even had to negotiate with the local Ulster Unionist councillor who owns the adjoining field for car parking space. Even at the end, Seamus was, in his inimitable way, telling us to work together.

I remember having a pint with him in the Victoria Bar in Markethill which, as the name suggests, hadn’t hosted many gatherings of nationalist politicians over the years. Even still, everyone who called in made a point of calling over to see Seamus. And as he held court, telling stories of the past, he recalled the pain this mostly unionist community had suffered.

“Every death diminished us all,” he said.

And he was right.

None of us could have imagined then the course of events that would take place in the 12 months that have followed. Our society has been buffeted by the twin storms of the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that Brexit has created.

These are events which could have driven our communities closer together, compelling us to share experience, resource and support to get through one of the most testing periods of the new century.

Unfortunately, our response has more often been characterised by division, diverging strategies and an unfathomable unwillingness to get on the same page.

When I think of what Seamus would have made of the events of the last year, I’m reminded of a line from his maiden speech in the House of Commons (a speech that was boycotted by every unionist MP save one Enoch Powell who remained only to heckle).

Mallon said: “We have two stark and clear choices. We can live together in generosity and compassion or we can continue to die in bitter disharmony.”

Some 35 years later it’s hard to disagree with his analysis.

The generation of Mallon and Hume found a calling in the movement for civil rights, justice, equality and peace. They were, it is incontestable, the most successful group of citizen and political activists in Irish history. They achieved what had seemed impossible for hundreds of years – an end to the Anglo-Irish conflict using only the force of their argument and the strength of their vision. And in doing so they removed the millstone of bloodshed that had been passed from generation to generation on our island.

We have the opportunity to build a new country. One where we celebrate the traditions of all our communities

As we set about tackling the big challenges of this new decade – the climate crisis, the redefinition of workers' lives and the systemic and lasting impact of the pandemic on economies and communities – I believe that we are all called to build a new future together.

Seamus's lasting legacy is, as he so aptly expressed in the final lines of his book, that we rest in the shade of trees planted by his generation. It is beyond time that we began sowing the seeds of a new Ireland for future generations.

Over the course of the last number of months we have been conducting hours of quiet conversations with people across this island from a range of backgrounds. In the months ahead we will hold hundreds more conversations with every community, sector and generation.

We are listening to their concerns, working to address their fears, but most of all seeking to build a consensus about how we can shape a new society and a new country that meets the aspirations of all our people.

This work is challenging. It demands that we stretch ourselves again to accommodate our communities in all their difference and diversity, but it is, ultimately, necessary that we plot a course through the immense period of change we're living through.

I sincerely believe that the UK is coming to an end. And I don't say that to be triumphalist, it is simply the conclusion of the last decade of British government policy that has stripped away public services, removed opportunity and aspiration from the vocabulary of too many communities and left us on the edge of Europe.

I believe that a new future is not only possible but that it is increasingly viewed as the best possible outcome for more and more of the people we're speaking to.

We have the opportunity to build a new country. One where we celebrate the traditions of all our communities. A society where free movement of people, goods, services and ideas is guaranteed across our continent. A shared home place for all of our people.

Some 35 years ago, Seamus Mallon ended his maiden speech in the House of Commons with a sincere appeal that lies at the heart of our movement and at the centre of the project we're advancing. He said: "I ask the unionists in the North of Ireland to say for the first time, 'come and build with us. Say yes'."

The offer will always be on the table.

“We are all connected, one way or the other.” “THE BANGOR SPECTATOR” 30th January 2021

As a proud son of Derry, I am perhaps a little too reluctant to give much credit to other counties for the figures they produce. It is a consequence of the legends that have come from our part of the world – Hume, Heaney and the others who have shaped this place for the better. But the people of my city and the people of County Down share a profound connection because the patron saint of Derry, Colmcille, spent his formative years at Movilla Abbey in what would later become Newtownards.

It is the nature of living in such a small place that we are all connected, one way or another, by our shared history. While we may not always agree on that history, or its interpretation, it is important that we are all given the space and opportunity to celebrate it, share it and talk to one another about it. That is one of my most sincerely held convictions and it is influenced by one of my political heroes, Seamus Mallon, whose one year anniversary is this week.

He put it powerfully when he said ‘We have two stark and clear choices. We can live together in generosity and compassion or we can continue to die in bitter disharmony’. As we are confronted by the big challenges of this new decade – the climate crisis, the redefinition of workers’ lives and the systemic and lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people and businesses, I believe that we are all called again to make a stark and clear choice. We can continue to pull apart, seeking to focus only on that which divides us, following a politics that has ill-served communities from Crossgar to Conlig.

Or we can build a new future together, we can spill our sweat to create a new society that meets the aspirations of all our people and celebrates our communities in all of their difference and diversity. I believe that means building a new Ireland. We are entering into one of the most significant periods of modern history on this island.

Over the course of the last number of months, we have been conducting hours of quiet conversations with people across this island from a range of backgrounds. In the months ahead, we will hold hundreds more conversations with every community, sector and generation. We are listening to their concerns, working to address their fears but most of all, seeking to build a consensus about how we can shape a new society and a new country that meets the hopes and aspirations of everyone who lives here.

The call for change that we have been hearing is reflected in the polls released this week that show a live conversation about our future is happening. People are questioning, many for the first time, whether old certainties, loyalties and labels may give way to a new and exciting future. What I can promise you is that a conversation led by the SDLP will always be about what is best for our communities.

Our new Ireland will not be built on the rubble of our terrible past. We understand that our scarred history places a solemn responsibility on us to conduct the coming conversation with patience, care and compassion. The work is challenging, it demands that we stretch ourselves again but it is, ultimately, necessary that we plot a course through the immense period of change we are living through. I want you to be a part of it. The people of this island share deep and meaningful connections based on our common history. I believe that this is the moment to build a new future together based on our common values.



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