

# 5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland

## | Sample answer

### **What was the impact of John Hume on Northern Ireland? (2016)**

John Hume, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998 for his career's contribution to the search for peace in Northern Ireland, had a tremendous impact on the region and its people. From his early days in the civil rights movement to his participation in talks with Gerry Adams much later, he was a man dedicated to finding a non-violent solution in attaining peace in Northern Ireland. He was an ever-present figure in the affairs of the North, be it founding the political party the SDLP or brainstorming solutions to the problems of the province as he did with the New Ireland Forum in the 1980s. It is fair to say his impact on the State was largely positive – certainly for the Nationalist and Catholic community that he represented. The following essay will examine these impacts in further detail.

One of his first contributions to Northern Ireland came with positive impacts for the citizens of Derry. Hume was a founding member of the Derry Credit Union which became a vital financial lifeline to help unemployed Catholics in particular. He had come to realise that the Protestant-dominated councils were doing little to help such people, and so this step proved fruitful for many in need. From 1964 to 1968 he was president of the Credit Union League of Ireland. He once said of this credit union endeavour: "it's the thing I'm proudest of because no movement has done more good for the people of Ireland, north and south, than the credit union movement."

In a way, Hume's participation in the affairs of Northern Ireland was only beginning. Hume, among others, advocated for the establishment of a new college in Derry. In what became known as the "Coleraine University Controversy", he saw the potential of opening a university in Derry as a means of uniting the disparate communities of the North. One biographer wrote that Hume's Guildhall Speech in Derry in 1965 where he spoke of the benefits of having a university in the city as "electrifying" and one that "marked the beginning of his political career". Hume in fact founded the University for Derry Committee which was supported by both Unionists and Nationalists. The

Lockwood Report had found that Coleraine was the best location for the new university, but this decision was seen as deliberate means of further maintaining Unionist power. The University for Derry Committee staged a huge protest and went to Stormont with a motorcade of 2,000 cars, but to ultimately little avail as the establishment of the college went ahead in Coleraine. However, it was a big learning curve for Hume. He realised that there were indeed Protestants willing to treat Catholics as equals. His goals were now directed towards a long-term strategy to mobilise, as one writer put it, “the bright young men and women, armed with first-class qualifications” to seek equality more broadly across Northern Irish society.

In 1967 Hume was one of the founding members of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. The NICRA was to have a major impact on the North. It had an empowering effect on its members and those it represented. Of course, there were the literal impacts of the marches that they conducted as well as the positive effects of the pursuit of their aims which indicated that Hume and others were no longer willing to allow the mistreatment of Catholics to go unchecked. Their primary aims were to get one person, one vote, to end gerrymandering, enact laws against discrimination, repeal the Special Powers Act, and have the B-Specials disbanded. Testament to the impact of the campaigning of Hume and the civil rights movement in general, Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O'Neill announced on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1968 a Five Point Reform Programme to address some of the burning issues at hand – including having parts of the Special Powers Act suspended.

Hume continued to influence Northern Ireland affairs in the 1970s. Having been a founding member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in 1970 Hume was now in a position to even more robustly lobby for his interest group. Also, it is important to emphasize that throughout this time, and his entire career from start to finish, Hume was committed to finding a peaceful means to matters in the North. As the Provisional IRA began to gain ground, Hume was determined to find a non-violent method to making Northern Irish society work. In fact, he was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King Jr., whom he quoted repeatedly. Hence, his participation in the Sunningdale Agreement 1973-1974 illustrates Hume's commitment to find a democratic way forward. Though this power-sharing executive was short-lived, Hume, who had the role of Minister for Commerce, was part of a symbolic moment in the North. It showed that Unionists and Nationalists could indeed work together. It was an historic example of cooperation that certainly had a positive impact on Nationalists in the province, indicating to them that there

may be hope of a cooperative solution in the future. Further proof of Hume's growing influence in the 1970s is seen through his ascendancy in the SDLP. By 1979 he had become the party's leader.

The 1980s continued to show the impactful nature of Hume on politics. He participated in the New Ireland Forum talks in May 1983 with Garret Fitzgerald, Dick Spring and other Irish politicians to explore ways of achieving Irish unity by consent. Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister at the time, infamously rebuked the three possible solutions posited by the talks in her "Out, Out, Out" speech, but by 1988 Hume was to have a more successful impact on the Northern Irish "question", when he engaged in talks with Gerry Adams. Although no agreement was bartered, the groundwork was laid for a solution to come in time. Hume's aim was to persuade Adams to move the Republican movement away from terror and to find an answer through politics. In 1991 Hume wrote a draft declaration that was to become the basis of the Downing Street Declaration in 1993. The following year, the IRA announced a ceasefire. Evidently, in light of this, Hume had a hugely powerful impact through his actions at this time.

An Irish Time article put it best: "John Hume transformed the politics of Ireland North and South, and reshaped relationships between Ireland and Britain." The article also accurately identifies that "his philosophy rested upon principles of tolerance, social justice, respect for and accommodation of difference, the complete rejection of violence". This indeed is the perfect summary of a man that had an undoubtedly remarkable impact on the State of Northern Ireland.