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## **COMMENT & ANALYSIS: Ireland after Hume: Brendan O'Leary applauds the career of the SDLP leader and looks at the future for moderate nationalism:**

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By BRENDAN O'LEARY

The politician with the most enduring and constructive role in Northern Irish politics has been John Hume, member of parliament, member of the European parliament, Nobel prize winner and co-founder of the Social Democratic and Labour party.

The achievements of Mr Hume, who announced his resignation as SDLP leader yesterday, are remarkable. With other civil rights activists he formed the first well organised political party among non-Unionists. The SDLP seeks Irish unity by consent but, in the words of Mr Hume's newspaper articles of the late 1960s, it wants reform, reconciliation and reunification - and in that order.

Mr Hume was the party's strategic brain and alliance-builder. Power-sharing and equality in the North, an end to unionist discrimination and Tyranny, particularly in emergency powers and internment without trial, were immediate objectives. Others, equally important, were an institutionalised Irish dimension, linking the North and the South within the emerging new Europe, police reform, and a modern Bill of Rights.

He was the best of the SDLP's ministers in the brief power-sharing government of 1974. Its collapse persuaded him to internationalise the conflict and its resolution. He embraced European social democracy, took the party into the Socialist International and became the party's first member of the European parliament in 1979.

Mr Hume became a Westminster MP but he knew that Irish nationalist influence there was never likely to be pivotal. He focused where the UK would have to echoes of his words. He worked on and in Irish America and Washington.

Mr Hume's connections and his ability to use the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs were decisive in the making of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, which made possible the Irish peace process of the 1990s, and the Belfast Agreement of 1998. He was particularly skilful in ensuring that the SDLP never became too strongly aligned with any of the three main Irish parties but made sure that each would follow his conception of what was necessary.

His role in creating the conditions for the IRA cease-fire in the 1994 is internationally renowned, and the institutional content of the Good Friday Agreement bears his impress. The agreement was his crowning achievement.

Mr Hume leaves the stage, after protracted illness, at a delicate moment. But he had to go in order to help rejuvenate his party, which was battered by falling just behind Sinn Fein in votes and seats won in the Westminster general election.

The UK is considering a third suspension of the institutions of the agreement to enable a further six weeks of negotiations before determining whether to have fresh assembly elections or a fundamental review. If it suspends it will be the third violation of the treaty it signed with the

Irish government in 1999, but it will plead necessity.

Mr Humé's planned resignation will doubtless encourage the UK government to postpone serious consideration of the election option until November, by which time the SDLP's new leadership will be in place. The situation in the streets is tense and antagonistic: loyalist paramilitaries are in breach of their ceasefires; loyalists blockade children on their way to school; people linked to the IRA have been arrested in Colombia.

The impasse of the early summer has produced movement. London has committed, though still in the future perfect tense, to being very close to the full implementation of the Patten report on policing. The SDLP has decided to join the new police board. Sinn Féin has declined, holding out for firmer assurances on necessary legislative changes, and basking in its recent electoral successes.

But the ground is shifting under Sinn Féin because of the IRA's Colombian adventures, which went down badly in Washington and Dublin, and are now regarded as wholly inexcusable after the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Mr Humé's successors - there must also be a new deputy - have demanding tasks. They must be able to get on reasonably with unionists if the executive is to be re-formed, and to show nationalists that they are their champions: Mr Humé's post-national talk was better suited to seminars than to the streets of Belfast or Derry.

They must hold the UK government vigorously to account on police reform, keep their distance from Sinn Féin, but avoid the label of being the Stoop Down Low Party. And they must maintain Mr Humé's international capital. Seamus Mallon MP, Mr Humé's deputy, can do that, but he has announced his intention to step down at the next assembly elections. There is at least one younger man who can do the job, Mark Durkan, MLA, Mr Humé's long-term adviser, and the current minister of finance.

The writer is professor of political science at London School of Economics and visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania Copyright: The Financial Times Limited