John Hume and Non-Violence

John Hume was born in 1937 in Northern Ireland in the UK.

Northern Ireland was created in 1921 after Ireland was partitioned between Northern and Southern Ireland. While Republicans (who were mostly Catholics) wanted an independent Ireland, Unionists (who were mostly Protestant) wanted to remain in Britain. The divide between these groups was religious and based on national identity. Southern Ireland became the Irish Free State in 1922 and was independent while Northern Ireland remained British although it was given a high degree of home rule (much like Scotland and Wales have now). This meant it was given its own parliament (Stormont) which had powers devolved to it (given it to it by Westminster so they could decide matters, which the Westminster parliament decided for England, Scotland and Wales).

From 1925 to 1965, the Unionists used their majority to pass laws that discriminated against Catholics in Northern Ireland. This included access to jobs and housing which meant Catholics were more likely to leave Northern Ireland to seek work than Protestants. This meant that Catholics were poorer and living in worse conditions but had no way of improving their lives.

John Hume was a Catholic who was influenced by Dr Martin Luther King and the way that peaceful protests and demonstrations had led to changes in the law in the United States of America. He led similar demonstrations and sit downs, insisting on a strictly peaceful approach to highlight the grievances of Catholics in his home town of Derry-Londonderry.

Unfortunately for John Hume, the situation in Northern Ireland did become violent during a period known as 'The Troubles'. However, he campaigned for equality during the entire period and did not change his stance on violence claiming that it was futile. He led the Socialist and Liberal Democrat Party which was committed to finding a peaceful and just solution for Northern Ireland.

Even though it took decades, Hume was key in getting the IRA (Irish Republican Army) to call a ceasefire which led the way to the Good Friday Agreement, an ongoing commitment from all sides to implementing a peaceful solution. David Trimbell, who was leader of the protestant Ulster Unionist Party brokered a similar agreement with the Unionist paramilitaries, leading to both Trimbell and Hume being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.