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## Full text of Mary Lou McDonald's address to Ard Fheis 2018

15-19 minutes

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16 June, 2018 - by [Mary Lou McDonald TD](#)

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Táimid lán sásta bheith anseo ag céilúiradh ár Ard Fheis i mBéal Feirste.

Cathair speisialta, starúil.

Cathair ina bhfuil áit speisialta do gach uile duine.

Cathair ceannródaíoch, ach nach dhéannan dearmad faoin am atá chaite.

We meet here in the city of Belfast where for centuries history has been made and remade.

A city that has boasted industrial might, that has endured poverty, exclusion and discrimination.

A city that bears the scars of conflict and division and that today carries the promise of full equality, of fraternity and liberty.

A city that never lost its sense of community or its sense of humour.

The cradle of the United Irishmen; Home to the great Mary Ann McCracken, to Winifred Carney, to Bobby Sands, to Gerry Adams.

Belfast is a shared city – where we all feel at home.

Belfast we are so happy to be here!!

Since we gathered in February, some dear friends have passed away.

I want in particular to pay tribute to Joe Reilly.

Joe epitomised what it meant to be an Irish Republican and he will be missed.

We have also lost other friends and our sympathies go out to each of their families.

We will not forget those who forged a path for Republicans in tough times.

Céad míle fáilte to our international guests and supporters.

Thank you for keeping faith with Ireland and with us.

Welcome to all our foreign dignitaries and diplomats.

A special message of Solidarity to the people of Palestine and Gaza – Sinn Féin stands with you.

Ireland cannot stand idly by as you endure another onslaught and as the Israeli government flouts international law.

The Irish Government must act, must recognise the state of Palestine – the time is now.

### **A new Ireland is possible**

We are living through times of great change.

The old certainties are gone.

The perpetual Unionist majority in the North is no more.

The two and a half party system in the South has been consigned to history.

Leadership is shifting to a new generation.

We have the opportunity to reclaim Ireland for all our people, in all our diversity and difference.

Nelson Mandela once said, “It always seems impossible, until it is done”.

Nothing is impossible, no ambition too high for our new Ireland.

Realising our potential – 'getting it done' – that responsibility lies in our hands.

What we do today will make Ireland better tomorrow.

Building an open society, accountable government and a modern, progressive economy is work for today.

The new Ireland isn't some far off aspiration, some unattainable

dream, its foundations must be laid in the here and now.

## **Brexit**

Brexit has put the issue of the border and partition at the centre of the political agenda.

We are now challenged, all of us, right across Ireland to work in common cause to protect Irish interests, north and south.

This challenge is as real for Unionism as it is for Republicans and Nationalists.

Treading water, fingers crossed and hoping for the best is not a strategy at this time.

Propping up a Tory government that glories in willful ignorance, and indifference to Ireland is not the way forward.

Allowing the Tories to dodge, equivocate and engage in fantasy non-solutions to the Irish question is most certainly not the answer.

If the architects of Brexit still can't agree what Brexit looks like, that's their problem.

It will not become Ireland's problem.

The Tories need to know that.

The DUP needs to know that.

The upcoming European Summit is crunch time.

If the British government don't have a credible, acceptable proposal;

If they cannot demonstrate how they will avoid a hard border, protect the Good Friday Agreement and citizens' rights then the Irish government must call them out.

There can be no question of progressing to the next phase of these negotiations in the absence of an answer to the Irish question.

This is one test that our government cannot fail!

## **A new Ireland**

Our core objective is the reunification of Ireland.

The mechanism for achieving this is set out in the Good Friday

Agreement, an agreement that is now twenty years old.

The work to achieve it must be driven by those of us – in Sinn Féin and beyond – who passionately believe that all of our lives can be so much better in a new Ireland.

The new Ireland that we seek honours each citizen equally; respects identity and culture, is rooted in civil and human rights, respects all religious beliefs and none,

But does not impose the theology of any church;

Our new Ireland generates wealth and shares wealth; is driven by opportunity, ambition and sustainability; is defined by decency and compassion; respects privacy and celebrates community; allows us all to live in harmony under the one free sky in the place we call home.

### **Unionism & Reconciliation**

A new Ireland must be home for Unionists.

We need to understand that.

We need to find ways to talk about the future.

We need to find ways of reconciling the past.

These aren't easy things to do.

People suffered, were hurt, endured pain, inflicted pain.

We can't make that go away but we can say sorry to each other.

I believe it is important that we do.

As the leader of Sinn Féin, I pledge that we will never forget.

That we will work tirelessly to ensure that we never return to the dark days of conflict.

To every family that seeks truth, that still waits, decades on, for an inquest into the death of a loved one,

I promise that we will stand with you.

We will stand with the family of Pat Finucane and with everyone who seeks truth and justice.

And we will respect the rights of every section of our people to

remember and honour their dead.

There is much to be done to address the legacy of the past;  
For a start, the funding for legacy inquests must be released  
without any further delay.

The foot dragging by the British government is outrageous,  
unacceptable and must end.

### **Sinn Féin in Government**

Sinn Féin has worked in government in the north for a decade, in  
very challenging circumstances and with a most unlikely partner.

We made it work.

Martin McGuinness made it work.

We made it work, not because it was easy but because it was the  
right thing to do.

In the collective, national interest.

Let me be clear – a power-sharing executive and assembly in the  
North is still the right thing.

And we are up for that.

Michelle O'Neill stands ready to lead our team into Government.

We need partners who will legislate for the common good, not on  
the basis on personal prejudice or religious fundamentalism.

Partners who place respect, reconciliation, and the rights of  
citizens, above all else.

Partners with a real commitment to power-sharing – to sharing  
power, to mutual recognition, to rights.

These are the things the DUP must embrace.

Regrettably, the DUP remain in a fixed, negative space, more  
interested in facilitating the Tory Brexit than protecting the rights  
and livelihoods of people in the North.

And so the two governments must act now to deliver on Marriage  
Equality, to address the legacy of the past and to deliver Acht na  
Gaeilge.

Seo í Bliain na Gaeilge.

Ba cheart agus ba chóir go n-éisteofar le glór phobal na Gaeilge – ar fud an oileáin.

Tá an Ghaeilge ann dóibh siúd ar mhaith leo a labhairt, ach is le gach duine í.

Ó thaobh Sinn Féin, táimid tiomanta don dúshlán a thug an pobal dúinn anuraidh a shárú – sin chun Acht na Gaeilge a bhaint amach.

Agus bainfimid amach é a chairde.

Bígí cinnte faoi sin.

Acht Gaeilge anois!

People in the North cannot wait while the DUP play political games and go into hiding at Westminster.

The two Governments must act to convene the Intergovernmental Conference without further delay.

Unionism cannot and will not hold back the tide of change and equality.

### **Government in the South**

Neither can the political establishment in the south.

A lot has been said about the prospect of Sinn Féin entering government in the South.

A lot of noise as our political competitors vie with one another to come up with the best reason to keep us out of government.

Let me set a few things straight.

We are already a party of government.

I want to lead this party into a progressive government in the south.

I want to do that from a position of strength, a strength derived from the support of the people.

After the next election, Sinn Féin will talk to all political parties and the independents.

In those discussions we will stand on the side of ordinary people.

The people that government has forgotten, disregarded, left behind.

We will stand on the side of inclusion, accountability, and modern government.

We will stand for shared prosperity and decent work.

We will stand for a new, united Ireland.

We will see then if it is possible to agree a programme for government on that basis.

That is the objective.

Good government. Delivering for the people.

To those who are on an agenda to exclude us,

I invite them to wake up and smell the coffee.

To realise that Irish political life is no longer dictated by them, it is no longer their way or the highway.

We are here, we are equal.

Our democratic mandate and more importantly the people who vote for Sinn Féin will be respected.

It is not for Leo Varadkar or Micheál Martin to decide whether or not we enter government.

That decision will be made, in the first instance by the people.

At the election the people are in control, we will ask them to back us, to give us the opportunity, the chance to make big changes.

### **Health, Housing & Shared Prosperity**

We are the party to end the crises in health and housing.

We have the policies, we have the people and we have the political will.

#### **Health**

Our health service can be fixed.

To address the scandal of people lying on hospital trolleys, we will immediately reopen hospital beds closed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

We will prioritise the retention of staff, and we will deliver a better pay deal for our nurses.

We will prioritise and invest in Mental Health services and supports.

It is a matter of great disgrace that Simon Harris now presides over seven hundred and seven thousand people on hospital waiting lists.

We will tackle this crisis by introducing an integrated management system to reduce waiting times.

I want to pay tribute to Vicky Phelan, Emma Mhic Mhathuna, Irene Teap and so many other women and families who were misled, failed, who were subjected to a cover up by the HSE and Cervical Check.

They are people of courage, of principle. They now set the standard for the system.

Many people believe that in Ireland no-one in authority is ever held to account;

They've good reason for thinking this.

I want to make it clear that we will hold people to account, that we will not tolerate the HSE, or any other agency of the state, playing games with people's lives.

## **Housing**

The housing crisis is a national emergency.

We have had four Housing Ministers since Fine Gael came to power.

Eoghan Murphy has failed dismally to turn the tide because he is simply the latest proponent of disastrous Fine Gael policy.

The housing emergency is a whole of government issue.

The buck stops with Leo Varadkar.

His government has failed:

To house our citizens,

To tackle crisis rents,

To get a grip of homelessness,

A government with Sinn Féin would take the responsibility that the Taoiseach refuses to take.

I know that for many, home ownership has become a pipe dream.

This can only be addressed by an ambitious affordable housing programme.

We'll build social housing and build communities, we'll end the distress of renters by introducing real rent certainty and security of tenure.

Sinn Féin in government will work so that no child calls a hotel room 'home'.

We are Irish republicans and we believe that housing is a right.

### **Shared Prosperity**

Prosperity is of no value if it is just for the few.

Prosperity must be for all.

Our agenda in government is a shared prosperity fueled by ambition and driven by opportunity.

Sinn Féin will deliver for those who struggle to make ends meet, despite getting up early and working hard every day.

For those who do everything possible to better their lives, and the lives of their families, yet the wolf remains all too close to their door.

A visit to the doctor, the car breaking down, or back to school costs should not be a financial disaster.

No parent should have to pay the equivalent of a second mortgage for childcare.

Sinn Féin in government will replace this vulnerability with prosperity, certainty and the ability to plan for the future.

Shared prosperity is also good for business, for enterprise, for innovation and for productivity.

To achieve these things, business requires workers who are secure in their lives.

Workers require affordable homes, healthcare and childcare.

If business is to succeed we must invest in our people and in our infrastructure.

A decade of under investment, cutbacks and austerity has left deep scars.

It is time to build the schools, hospitals and communications network needed for a modern Ireland.

Part of this must be the state taking ownership of the rollout of essential broadband infrastructure.

This means getting rural broadband done and getting it right.

### **The Eighth Amendment**

The Eighth Amendment has been repealed.

This Ard Fheis has voted to decide party policy and we now move forward together, united in our determination to see the necessary legislation passed without delay.

That is our duty to all the women of Ireland.

Change is coming.

There is nothing to fear in that change.

And let me say this loud and clear – the North is next.

No woman will be left behind.

Every woman who calls this island home must have access to compassionate medical care at home.

### **A new Ireland for women**

In the new Ireland we are building women will finally have our place as equals.

We need a step-change in how society views and treats women.

Not half measures or concessions.

I am talking about full equality.

I am talking about a new Ireland in which women are no longer forced to the side-lines.

An Ireland where women are on the pitch and leading the team.

Repeal of the Eighth Amendment was only the start.

We must continue this work by achieving justice for the victims of the Cervical Check scandal.

For those affected by the illegal adoption scandal.

For the Magdalene women.

The opportunities of a new Ireland must belong to our daughters as much as they belong to our sons.

One hundred years ago, women secured the right to vote.

A century on, we carry their torch as we work for:

A new Ireland where women are safe.

A new Ireland where women are trusted.

A new Ireland where women are equally paid.

So sisters of Ireland, Mná na hEireann;

Let's keep our expectations high.

Dream big and plan for success.

Because progressive women and men, working together, are transforming our nation; creating an open, tolerant society that is better for women, better for men – better for us all.

### **Conclusion**

A chairde,

Fifty years ago people took a stand for civil rights.

People challenged, defied and faced down discrimination.

We salute them today.

Republicans have never sat around waiting.

Republicans get things done.

Not only do we dream of a better, modern, and united Ireland; we are building it today.

There is a place for everybody on this journey.

There is an equal place for everybody in a new Ireland.

Ireland is no longer simply orange and green.

Ireland is a rainbow of identities and cultures.

A place where diversity and difference can be embraced.

Ireland is changing.

A new and better Ireland is emerging.

To those who are impatient for equality and progress I say, this is your time.

This is your home.

This is your Ireland.

Sinn Féin is your party.

Let us seize the day.

Together, let us build a new and united Ireland.

Go raibh maith agaibh, a chairde.

Up the Republic.

An Phoblacht Abú.