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Irish Unity Referendum back at the centre of political discussion - Mary Lou McDonald TD

13-17 minutes

5 August, 2018 - by [Mary Lou McDonald TD](#)

Sinn Féin Leader Mary Lou McDonald TD has said "an Irish Unity referendum is back at the centre of political discussion".

She added that the process of building a new and united Ireland must involve a dialogue which includes unionists and that the Irish government has a responsibility to lead an informed and respectful discussion on the matter.

Ms McDonald made the remarks this afternoon during her keynote speech at the National Hunger Strike Commemoration in Castlewellan, Co Down.

The Sinn Féin Leader said;

"A referendum on a United Ireland is provided for in the Good Friday Agreement. The need for a referendum to end partition is writ large. The time for a Unity Referendum is drawing near. It is not a question of if a unity referendum will happen but a question of when.

"So too is the urgent need for dialogue to manage the change that is coming. That dialogue must involve unionist political leaders. Political leaders must begin practical preparations for a new, inclusive Ireland beyond partition.

"The Irish government in particular has a responsibility to lead an informed, reasoned and respectful public dialogue on this issue. We are entering a defining period in Irish political history. Change is coming and it must be managed, sensitively and imaginatively. A

process of national reconciliation must be central to any genuine effort to unite the people of this island.

"As Britain turns away from Europe, the appeal of being part of a new and outward-looking Ireland will, I believe, prove ever more attractive to some within the unionist community.

"British identity can and must be accommodated in a united Ireland and I believe nationalist Ireland is open to constitutional and political safeguards to ensure this."

Ms McDonald highlighted Sinn Féin's vision of a United Ireland;

"It will be an Ireland united and at peace with itself. It will be a successful, prosperous Ireland of opportunity for all, regardless of class, colour, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

"It will be an Ireland that will take its place among the nations of the world; an ancient European nation that stands squarely on the side of global justice, on the side of emancipation, freedom solidarity."

The Sinn Féin leader said her party is committed to re-establishing the Executive and Assembly.

"The Irish and British governments have said there will be a new round of talks in the autumn. That is welcome.

"However basic rights, respect and equality cannot be disregarded, they are not bargaining chips. They are for all in society.

"Marriage equality, the right to inquests and language rights are for everyone.

"Fifty years on from the civil rights movement, sections of political unionism still resist equality and rights, but they will not succeed.

"It is not sufficient for the two governments to only call a talks process. They must bring something to the table. They need to make clear that agreements must be implemented in full.

"The way to unlock the political process is to make clear that rights enjoyed in the rest of Ireland and across Britain will be implemented in the north.

"Of course, we are dealing with a British government that is dependent on DUP votes and sees Ireland and as collateral

damage in their desire to remain in office.

"That is why we need a strong Irish government leading on these issues." CRÍOCH/ENDS

Full text of Mary Lou McDonald's speech at the 37th commemoration of the 1981 Hunger Strike in Castlewellan, Co Down - 5th August 2018

Fáilte romhaibh go léir, a chairde.

Táimid anseo inniu chun comóradh a dhéanamh ar na laochra a fuair bás ar Stailc Ocráis agus táimid anseo chun seasamh le muintir na Stailceoirí Ocráis.

Spreagann sibh muid go deo.

Today, Irish Republicans commemorate the sacrifice and celebrate the lives of our Hunger Strikers.

We are humbled to stand here with the families of the Hunger Strikers – families who have given so much and who have carried their loss with such dignity.

You continue to inspire us all.

The 1981 Hunger Strike was a pivotal moment in Irish history, which saw Republican prisoners thwart British government efforts to criminalise the struggle for a united Ireland.

The bravery of the Hunger Strikers has inspired freedom loving people across the globe.

In Ireland, Republicans remember with deep pride the sacrifice and heroism of those who died in the H-Blocks - Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreech, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee and Michael Devine.

We also remember Thomas Ashe, Terence MacSwiney, Frank Stagg and Michael Gaughan who died in English jails and all those from every generation who died on Hunger Strike.

1981 was a watershed year in Irish history.

The Irish political landscape was upended and recast.

The election of Bobby Sands as MP for Fermanagh South/Tyrone and the election of Kieran Doherty and Paddy Agnew as anti-H Block TDs changed and charged the direction of Republican electoral strategy.

It shattered the era of single party government in the south.

The Hunger Strikers gave Thatcher her answer.

They would not be criminalised.

Ten young men - young Volunteers - born into an oppressive, sectarian State.

Ten who took a stand.

Ten who would not be broken.

Ten who amplified the words of Terence MacSwiney, the Lord Mayor of Cork who died on Hunger Strike in Brixton Prison in October 1920, who said:

"This contest of ours is not on our side a rivalry of vengeance but one of endurance... It is not they who can inflict most but they who can suffer most who will conquer."

Ten lives cut short.

Ten grieving families.

Ten figures who will never be forgotten, who loom large in the history of Ireland.

Thirty seven years on, many of the men and women active in the jail protests have raised families.

They have lived to see their children grow up in a changed and changing Ireland.

Today, the legacy of the Hunger Strikers lives on.

Republicanism is renewed and revitalised.

There are more Republicans across Ireland now than at any time since partition.

A new generation of Republicans are driving change; change rooted in the Republican values of equality, solidarity and freedom.

This year marks the centenary of the 1918 General Election - in which a majority of Irish citizens turned their backs on Westminster and voted overwhelmingly for an Independent Ireland.

This was a changing Ireland led by a revolutionary generation.

Sinn Féin MPs refused to go to Westminster and established the First Dáil.

This election was the first in which women had a vote.

And the first women elected to Westminster was Sinn Féin Abstentionist MP Constance Markievicz.

Today, Ireland is once again at a point of great change.

Many old certainties are gone.

Long standing conservative forces have been weakened.

The tide of history is with those seeking a progressive, inclusive future.

The tide of history is with those who seek a United Ireland.

It is increasingly clear that the partition of Ireland is an obstacle to building a modern, open and forward-looking society.

Economic and social challenges, the civil rights of women and gay citizens and, of course, Brexit and the prospect of a hard border, are further exposing the fact that a divided Ireland does not serve the needs of our people.

Tá aontacht na hÉireann ar ais i lár an phlé pholaitiúil agus tá gá le reifreann chun Éire a aontú.

Irish unity is back at the centre of political discussion.

A referendum on a United Ireland is provided for in the Good Friday Agreement.

The need for a referendum to end partition is writ large.

The time for a Unity Referendum is drawing near.

It is not a question of if a unity referendum will happen but a question of when.

So too is the urgent need for dialogue to manage the change that is

coming.

That dialogue must involve unionist political leaders.

Political leaders must begin practical preparations for a new, inclusive Ireland beyond partition.

The Irish government in particular has a responsibility to lead an informed, reasoned and respectful public dialogue on this issue.

We are entering a defining period in Irish political history.

Change is coming and it must be managed, sensitively and imaginatively.

A process of national reconciliation must be central to any genuine effort to unite the people of this island.

As Britain turns away from Europe, the appeal of being part of a new and outward-looking Ireland will, I believe, prove ever more attractive to some within the unionist community.

British identity can and must be accommodated in a united Ireland and I believe nationalist Ireland is open to constitutional and political safeguards to ensure this.

The right of unionists to celebrate their history and their tradition, to recount their experience and suffering, and to remember and honour their dead must be - and will be - respected.

Just as our right to remember, commemorate, to honour our dead must be respected.

The responsibility to ensure an agreed process of change is also why we need the institutions at Stormont re-established.

It is why we need the foundations of the Good Agreement - equality, rights and respect - in place.

Increased all-Ireland co-operation and the building of relationships between people from different political outlooks, is crucial as we face into challenging and changing times.

Sinn Féin is committed to re-establishing the Executive and Assembly.

The Irish and British governments have said there will be a new

round of talks in the autumn.

That is welcome.

However basic rights, respect and equality cannot be disregarded, they are not bargaining chips.

They are for all in society.

Marriage equality, the right to inquests and language rights are for everyone.

Fifty years on from the civil rights movement, sections of political unionism still resist equality and rights, but they will not succeed.

It is not sufficient for the two governments to only call a talks process.

They must bring something to the table.

They need to make clear that agreements must be implemented in full.

The way to unlock the political process is to make clear that rights enjoyed in the rest of Ireland and across Britain will be implemented in the north.

Of course, we are dealing with a British government that is dependent on DUP votes and sees Ireland and as collateral damage in their desire to remain in office.

That is why we need a strong Irish government leading on these issues.

Díreach céad bliain ó shin ar an 4 Lúnasa 1918 bhí an Domhnach Gaelach ann, le cluichí ar fud na tíre, mar freagra ar rialtas na Breataine a bhí ag iarraidh cosc a chur ar Chumann Lúthchleas Gael.

100 years ago this weekend, 4 August 1918 was Gaelic Sunday. On that day hundreds of football, hurling and camogie matches were played all over Ireland by the GAA in defiance of a ban by the British regime in Dublin Castle.

It was an act of mass resistance by the Irish nation in which tens of thousands of people took part as players and spectators.

And it was a reminder to all - then and since - that rights and freedoms are won by those who stand up for them and take them with both hands.

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has said that the north will never again be left behind.

We are fast approaching a time when that commitment will be tested.

The process of political change is not confined to the north.

The days of two conservative political parties completely dominating politics in the south is over.

The growing strength of Sinn Féin has been central to this change and further change is on the way.

As evidenced by recent referendums, this generation is making political and social change, and there is further to go.

Broadening out that process to include more of our citizens, in particular those who need economic change, requires a new type of government.

Only a government of which Sinn Féin is a major component will address the challenges that face our people.

Only Sinn Féin will bring fairness, equality and social justice to the heart of government.

Spreagann na Stailceoirí Ocras muid sa lá atá inniu ann.

Táimid tiomanta chun cinntiú go ndéanfaidh an tír a thógfaimid onóir dóibh.

Beidh Éire aontaithe, síochánta.

Beidh deis rathúil ann; agus neamhaird do cuid creideamh, do dath, do inscne nó do claonadh gnéasach.

The Hunger Strikers lit a flame which burns brightly today in the hearts of all Irish Republicans.

We are deeply committed to ensuring that the type of Ireland we build will honour their extraordinary sacrifice.

It will be an Ireland united and at peace with itself.

It will be a successful, prosperous Ireland of opportunity for all, regardless of class, colour, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

It will be an Ireland that will take its place among the nations of the world; an ancient European nation that stands squarely on the side of global justice, on the side of emancipation, freedom solidarity.

We will face political resistance on the way.

But Republicans are long sighted and optimistic.

Frustration, anger and negativity cannot and will not blunt or blur our political imagination, political struggle and political will.

If anyone had a right to be frustrated, angry and negative it was the prisoners of Long Kesh, Armagh and others elsewhere.

But thirty-seven years ago, naked and imprisoned, Bobby Sands looked beyond the immediate, daunting challenges that faced him and towards the future.

When the system tried to break Bobby, his reply was: "Our revenge will be the laughter of our children"

We draw our inspiration from those words.

Those words typify the generosity and hope of a true leader - a leader who looked beyond the challenges of today and towards the opportunity of tomorrow.

That is the leadership, hope and positivity that should drive Republicans today.

Despite all the challenges and political frustrations that may confront us, we know in our hearts and in our heads that a new and agreed Ireland is coming.

As Bobby said: "It is then that we will see the rising of the moon".

Go raibh maith agaibh go léir.

Ar aghaidh linn le chéile.