



Sinn Féin - On Your Side

Mary Lou McDonald's full speech in Belfast

30 July, 2019 - by Mary Lou McDonald TD



Go raibh maith agaibh a chairde.

Táim lán-sásta bheith anseo libh i mBéal Feirste ar maidin.

Boris Johnson is now the British Prime Minister.

He is not my Prime Minister.

Nor were any of his predecessors.

In the week since a jingoistic and bullish Boris Johnson strode into Downing Street and appointed a staunchly

Brexit Cabinet, there has been endless speculation about what it all means for Brexit; for the Good Friday Agreement; for the people of the north who voted to remain; for the relationship between the Irish and British governments, and much more.

Whatever one thinks of Boris Johnson, and his apparent desire to be the new Winston Churchill, it is a truism of the long tortured relationship between our two islands that every British Prime Minister has approached the issue of Ireland on the basis of British self-interest.

It is not about the needs, the priorities, the interests of the people who share this island, including unionists.

It's about protecting and advancing British interests or in this case English interests.

Johnson in this respect will be no different than all the others.

He has repeated his determination to be out of the EU by October 31st.

He says he wants a new deal with Europe.

He has threatened to withhold Britain's £39 billion divorce settlement and is demanding that the backstop be scrapped.

He has tried to bully the EU and Ireland. To accept less than the minimum of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Backstop.

The EU has said no – the withdrawal agreement is not up for renegotiation.

The British government cannot and will not intimidate the Irish government or the people who voted to remain. Those days are long gone. The Backstop is the minimum required to safeguard Irish Interests.

No one with a care for Ireland's interest would consider renegotiating or reducing the minimum safeguards of the Backstop at the demand of Boris Johnston.

The British government is now threatening to reintroduce direct rule to get their way. In pursuit of Brexit they are threatening to bin the Good Friday Agreement and set the clock back.

This is unacceptable.

This represents a huge threat to the people – all the people of this island.

Stormont Talks

The Good Friday Agreement generation has come of age.

This generation is entitled to the opportunities gifted to those who came before; free healthcare and education and a home and fair pay.

They are also entitled to the rights, equality and respect that was denied to a previous generation.

Rights which are now available to citizens elsewhere in these islands but denied here in the North.

These are just and reasonable demands to make of any government north or south. This is the new Ireland that we are building.

It is the entitlement of all citizens to be treated with equality and respect. It is the expectation that government will

operate to the highest standards.

The institutions in the north are not simply devolved institutions. They are premised on power-sharing and partnership.

For over ten years Martin McGuinness acted to keep the institutions operating and delivering for all. He acted to promote reconciliation and respect for all.

At times he was met with provocation and duplicity; agreements made that were never honoured. The actions of both the British government and the DUP eroded public confidence in the institutions. Huge financial scandals such as RHI brought the institutions to an end.

Martin did not lightly walk away from the institutions

Those who accuse Martin or Sinn Féin of deliberately crashing the institutions are ignorant at best and malicious at worst.

Last Friday I called our negotiations team together with our national leadership. The report was clear; meetings have been held but little progress was made.

The outstanding issues remain the outstanding issues. They are not intractable and do not give any section of the community a win over another section of the community. This is not a game in which a score is kept. Marriage equality for our LGBT brothers and sisters does not denigrate the rights of others to marry. Respecting the rights of Irish speakers does not diminish anyone's sense of Britishness.

Resolving the past and promoting reconciliation is a threat to no one.

This round of talks to restore the power sharing government have thus far failed to achieve agreement.

This is because these key issues have not been faced up to yet.

The DUP are focusing on protecting the Union with Britain above all else regardless of the consequences for society, for the economy or for the people.

They are ignoring the anti-Brexit vote of the northern electorate.

Some DUP leaders see a hard border as the best way to maintain the Union. A new partition of Ireland.

This is folly and contradicts the search for agreement and restoration of the institutions.

The key issues – well known publicly and all rights based and for the benefit of everyone – must be resolved.

Sinn Féin wants to see the power sharing arrangements working and delivering for citizens.

Let there be no doubt about that.

We have a British government publicly walking away from their explicit obligation to act with "rigorously impartiality", colluding in the continued denial of rights, and refusing to implement agreement on an Irish Language Act and dealing with the past.

If the talks are to be successful the issues of rights, respect and equality need to be resolved.

The next Assembly and Executive will not be like the last.

A new progressive dynamic is at play.

The majority of MLAs are against Brexit, ongoing Tory Austerity and the cutting of public services.

They are also socially progressive.

I would hope that all parties, with a mandate who have called for the res-establishment of the Executive will be partners in power-sharing.

Those parties can shape the incoming executive and assembly in opposing Brexit and pushing forward on progressive social and economic changes.

Promoting equality and inclusion. Building prosperity and ending poverty.

Central to all of this is the British Cabinet and in particular the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

A change of British policy is required to meet its commitments under the Good Friday Agreement to citizens in this jurisdiction to end the inequality and the disrespect.

These issues can and must be resolved.

The negotiators have met; the various party's positions are well rehearsed, now is the time for resolution.

The threat of Brexit

With less than three months to go the implications of Brexit for the future of our island are enormous.

Jobs will be lost.

Brexit is bad for all Ireland and the highest price will be paid by the economy and people of the north.

The most recent report published two weeks ago by the North's Department for the Economy predicts up to 40,000 jobs are at risk in the event of a no-deal Brexit. A huge number of job losses for a small region.

The DUP refuse to acknowledge what their Brexit will mean for our businesses, for our agri-food producers, our workers and our community sector if the British government crashes out of the EU without a deal.

Last month a confidential British government study was published by the Brexit select committee.

It identified 142 areas of co-operation between the 26 counties and the North, and between the island of Ireland and Britain. All will be disturbed by Brexit.

And then there is the future of the Good Friday Agreement and of the political institutions in this part of the island.

All this is now at risk. A hard border looms.

If the British Government have factored into their calculations a hard border, then they must factor in a Unity Referendum as laid out in the Good Friday Agreement.

The route back for the north into the EU is clear. Irish unity is the route back to the EU.

We will be meeting Boris Johnston in the coming days. We will remind him not only of the need to respect the wishes of the majority to remain within the EU.

We will also remind him of his obligations under the Good Friday and subsequent agreements including the provision for a unity referendum

Brexit has re-exposed the folly of partition and reinforced the need for Irish unity.

Sinn Féin makes no apology for promoting our vision of a united Ireland.

We make no apology for promoting the urgent need for a conversation on the same.

What has anyone to fear from a conversation about our future?

Partition has failed.

It has prevented this island from reaching its potential for nearly a century.

Brexit will serve only to reinforce that partition and further damage our island.

The people of the north – unionist and nationalist – knew this when they voted to remain in the European Union.

This point has been conceded by the former British Prime Minister Theresa May who stated that she wasn't confident a referendum on Irish unity could be won by those promoting the status quo.

Political unionism has lost its electoral majority in a series of consecutive elections.

The nationalist people of the north have turned their backs on Westminster and increasingly look to Dublin for leadership.

Brexit has forced increasing numbers of people, from all backgrounds, to look South.

Every government prepares for the future – it is the proper and diligent thing to do.

With the threat of a no-deal Brexit now a real prospect, it is irresponsible not to prepare for constitutional change.

Last Friday An Taoiseach told the MacGill Summer School that the Government would have to consider a forum on Irish unity in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

While the Taoiseach has the responsibility to lead the debate on Irish Unity he should appoint an Irish Government Minister of State with the dedicated and specific responsibility of developing strategies to advance Irish unity and coordinating the Government's all-Ireland policies.

The government has to begin planning for unity.

Creating the environment for the necessary conversation and discussion to take place.

Looking at the steps needed to demonstrate that unity is in the best interest of all, economically viable, and welcoming for unionists, and all citizens.

A forum which is open to all strands of political opinion on this island can only be a good initiative.

The discussion about unity is taking place everywhere and everyday.

Peter Robinson, Paul Bew, Eileen Paisley, James Nesbitt, Harold Good and Mervyn Gibson – to name but a few – have all addressed the issue of unity from a distinctly unionist perspective.

These utterances are symptomatic of a growing discourse in the north and across the island.

Yet political unionism has buried its head in the sand as the debate rushes around them

Elements of our political establishment tell us that now is not the time to discuss Irish unity.

They are wrong.

Now, is exactly the right time to discuss it.

A growing number of people in the north, including many from a unionist background, are now considering their future in the context of Brexit.

Many are now open to discussing the prospect of a new Ireland, an agreed Ireland and united Ireland.

Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the SDLP should do the same.

I don't mean to provoke these parties – they contain many committed United Irelanders – but it is now far beyond time for a serious conversation about our future.

There is no contradiction between having a functioning Northern Assembly and Executive and planning for Irish unity. Sinn Féin wants to share power with unionists in the North and we want to share power with unionists in a united Ireland.

It is my belief that this will happen. Boris Johnson may try to prevent this and to use Ireland as part of his game playing with the EU. Our people – all of us including those who vote for the DUP – deserve better.

The choice is clear.

It is the choice between the narrow negative self-serving divisive decisions taken by little Englanders in Westminster.

Or a shared inclusive future in which we take our own decisions together in the interests of the people of this island.

Constitutional Change is coming. Preparation need to be made now.

Tá athrú ag teacht.

Ní mór dúinn a bheith ullamh.

Go raibh maith agaibh a chairde.

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