

Mary Lou McDonald address Sinn Féin election launch – 29th March 2022

Dia dhaoibh go léir a chairde. Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuilim thar a bheith sásta bheith libh anseo i mBéal Feirste anocht agus tá sé iontach scaifte chomh mór daoine a fheiceáil anseo inniu.

Is cathair í seo a bhfuil stair bhródúil aici. Is cathair í atá athraithe go mór. Tá an chathair seo óg, nua-aimseartha, éagsúil agus forásach. Agus tá sé ag tnúth le comhionannas agus athrú.

It is great to be here in Belfast tonight at a moment of real change and opportunity for the people of our island. A city with a very proud history with men and women like Bobby Sands, Winifred Carney, Henry Joy and Mary Ann McCracken but also men like my fellow Dubliner Edward Carson who I share much in common. We both attended Trinity College Dublin and both with a healthy scepticism of Tory governments, born of lengthy experience.

This city has changed immeasurably. This city is young, modern, diverse and progressive. This city is looking to a future which is all about opportunity, equality, good jobs, good public services and much, much more.

And it is not just Belfast that is changing, all of Ireland is changing and changing rapidly. The political landscape is being transformed by a generation hungry for change on our island. We can see it all around us every day. We can see it in this room tonight.

Fifty years ago - on 28th March 1972 –the old Stormont parliament collapsed. A parliament that had been built on foundations of discrimination, sectarianism and inequality came crashing down.

I say that not in any triumphant way but to simply to recognise the reality that a stable society that welcomes and values it's citizens, a society that embraces and encourages difference

cannot be built on a political system that is one dimensional and inward looking. A healthy society cannot be built on discrimination and inequality – that is the great lesson of the past. Today we are in a very different place.

I am passionate about unlocking the potential that exists on our island. I am passionate about setting out a vision for a united Ireland at peace with itself and with our neighbour. An Ireland within Europe, confident, forward-looking and proud of our transformative journey. Proud of the Good Friday Agreement and our ability to foster respect and equality, proud that we are not afraid of difference but we embrace it.

Almost 25 years on the Good Friday Agreement ensures. It protects the rights and identities of all. It allows us to plan for the future, to plan for the change that is coming, to plan for a new Ireland. It commits us to a power-sharing Executive which means that we have to plan together, work together, deliver together.

And it can work. People have got a glimpse in recent months of what is possible from an Assembly and an Executive that gets a chance to deliver. The first thing that Michelle O’Neill did when the DUP walked away from the Executive was to convene a meeting of party leaders to get work done.

And it worked – the Assembly has passed legislation after legislation on climate, on housing, on women’s rights and supports for people dealing with the cost-of-living crisis. And this has been matched by initiative after initiative from ministers at Executive level, despite the actions of a Tory government constantly undermining the Good Friday Agreement and trying to slow down the change that is coming.

For me the last few months are a small window into what is possible when parties with a vision for a better future are liberated to work together.

Imagine a full term of that sort of leadership and that sort of delivery.

An Executive that isn't interested in blocking but interested in advancing.

An Executive that is about the future not the past.

An Executive that values and embraces partnership over division. We are interested in people.

We are interested in making the political institutions work.

We are interested in delivery and in a bridge to a better shared future.

I believe there are many people from a unionist tradition who have embraced a progressive future, who actively support rights and entitlements for the LGBTQ community, for women's reproductive rights and for the rights of Irish speakers. They have no truck with sectarianism or discrimination and they are perfectly comfortable in their British identity as they should be. They also see the sense in partnership and agreement. That is what the next Assembly and Executive must be about.

- Supporting workers and families in a cost-of-living crisis.
- Investing in our health services so they are there when you need them most.
- Developing a new economic strategy that allows us to unleash the potential for well paid jobs and to expand into new markets.

Michelle and our team will be there – and those who join us will find a party ready to do business, ready to get back to delivering for people and ready to start building a new future.

We don't have to agree on everything, but we must agree that we are committed to the Assembly and the Executive. We must agree that we will deliver for the people who elect us. We must agree that we are willing to roll up our sleeves and get on with the business of government.

That is Sinn Féin's commitment to the people as we set out on this campaign.

We've had a glimpse of partnership and delivery over the past few months so let's be clear never again can the success or failure of the political institutions be measured simply in their ability to survive.

The success or failure of the institutions in the next mandate will be judged on the ability to deliver. To deliver effective government, to deliver progressive change and to deliver for our public services.

We are eager to be given the opportunity to build a true partnership government.

We are eager to be given that opportunity to lead, not just in the Assembly and Executive but across Ireland.

And while we take nothing for granted we are hopeful that in the time ahead Sinn Féin will also be part of, or maybe even lead the next government in Dublin.

We want to unite our people. We want to unite our country. We want to unleash the potential which is all around us.

This is a time for change. This is a time for leadership. This is a time to deliver.

Míle buíochas agus go raibh míle maith agaibh.

REMARKS BY SINN FÉIN VICE-PRESIDENT, MICHELLE O'NEILL MLA,

29 MARCH 2022, EUROPA HOTEL, BELFAST

'TIME FOR REAL CHANGE'

...

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

INTRODUCTION

It's great to see all of you here this evening.

We meet this evening as the national political landscape is shifting dramatically with people across our entire island demanding real change.

The change Sinn Féin is leading in this city and across Ireland is about putting families and workers first.

Our priority is to make politics work, and to show that real change is possible in making people's everyday lives better.

That means strengthening our health service, giving our children a world-class education, building affordable homes, making our communities safer, protecting our rural way of life and creating good jobs so the next generation has a future here.

PRIORITISING THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS AND HEALTH

It means supporting workers and families struggling through this cost-of-living crisis which is placing a heavy burden on many households.

Sinn Féin has made health a priority.

Finance Minister Conor Murphy has delivered £200 million to transform the health service and support health workers and has committed to making health the Executive's number one spending priority for the next three years.

We are committed to investing in health, tackling waiting lists and ensuring you can see a GP when you need one.

We need to protect the health service, resist Tory underfunding and attempts to dismantle the NHS.

People rightly want their politicians to work together to prioritise these very important issues.

The past two years has shown that power-sharing can work when all of those involved are invested and committed to it with unity of purpose and leadership.

DEFENDING THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Our political structures of governance are a cornerstone of the GFA framework.

Next Sunday will mark the twenty-fourth anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement – the bedrock of the peace process - the peace agreement that has parity of esteem, the principle of consent and equality and respect at its core.

This anniversary allows us an opportunity to reflect upon how far we have come, the journey of transformation we have all travelled.

It allows us to assess the present realities which confront us in 2022, not least in the context of Brexit, and importantly Ireland's future beyond Brexit.

As of the 3 February when DUP First Minister resigned from Office our local Executive has been unable to meet and take decisions on behalf of the public we serve.

This follows the DUPs unlawful boycott of the NSMC meetings.

The DUP boycott of the Executive and NSMC amounts to an assault on the Good Friday Agreement itself.

It is political vandalism.

Boris Johnson has acquiesced to this by staying silent, which tells us everything about his interest in the people, place and politics here. This is a Prime Minister and a government who never has, and never will prioritise the needs of the people here.

I represent the Good Friday Agreement generation and I make no apology for fiercely defending it.

I was in Washington over St Patrick's with Mary Lou and Conor and we delivered this message, but also heard loud and clear that the US administration will not do a US-British trade deal if the Good Friday Agreement is jeopardised in any way.

The solution to the Brexit problem is therefore the Protocol.

And whilst imperfect it does mitigate the North of Ireland from the worst impacts of Brexit, prevents a hard border and stops the complete unravelling of the Good Friday Agreement, and it is a fact that no credible alternative to it exists.

It is high time the present realities were honestly assessed and understood.

The All-Ireland economy continues to flourish.

This is good news for the economy, jobs, livelihoods and a new generation of young people.

This is where our focus must be.

On the future.

And on our young people.

That's why the type of futile security threats we saw over the last week in North Belfast and Derry or attacks on the offices of public representatives will not deter any of us.

The minority trying to draw us back will not win, this society is moving forward and peace and stability will always prevail.

The forthcoming Assembly election on 5 May will return in my opinion a majority of MLAs who support the Protocol, and who respect the rule of law.

The British Secretary of State Brandon Lewis and his government have abandoned any pretence of "rigorous impartiality" in the discharge of his duties.

We often hear talk about the need for 'balance', but it's a one-sided balance sheet as far as I am concerned when it comes to the attitude and approach of the Tories here.

The recent debacle around double-jobbing is a case in point which amounted to giving the DUP Leader an each-way-bet in the forthcoming Assembly election, while retaining his Westminster seat should things not turn out as they wish.

And again by working together, pressure from all of the other parties meant it was hastily withdrawn.

The failure by London to see the peace process as requiring the continued involvement of the two governments as co-guarantors is a core part of the problem.

Outstanding challenges remain and cannot be ignored because they are an enormous fault line and must be confronted and addressed. This includes, dealing with the legacy of the past, reconciliation and sectarianism, and the delivery of rights.

As we know the British government hasn't a good track record on the delivery of rights. In just the last week they have reneged on language rights and women's reproductive rights.

That's not good enough, and the campaigns will continue.

These rights will be delivered!

When the Assembly, Executive and NSMC were restored in January 2020 it was with a shared commitment to deliver the public services, societal reforms and future that our people need and deserve.

It was ambitious to form a five-party coalition Executive, but it was achieved, getting us back to genuine power-sharing, and thankfully so, because while everyone knew there would be challenges ahead, no one could have predicted that in only a matter of weeks that our Executive would be dealing with a global pandemic that would have such devastating impacts on every part of society, community and people's lives and livelihoods.

It is to the credit of all ministers from across the five parties that they responded and have worked with a unity of purpose, and unity of leadership for the past two years.

This is what the public want to see more of – co-operation and delivery.

And the contrast to that is Jeffrey Donaldson warning that it will be “difficult” for his party to re-enter the political institutions after the May 5th election. This is heard by those of us within nationalism as Unionism doing democracy on only unionism's terms.

Those who hanker for the past, who disrupt the present and who threaten our future need to realise that there is no going back, only forward.

The facts are that the balance of power at Stormont has shifted irreversibly and political unionism must come to terms with the fact the world is moving on fast.

So, while the DUP and the TUV are trying to take us backwards, our message is clear, we are only moving forward.

So it is yes to peace and stability;

- Yes to the GFA
- Yes to the Protocol
- Yes to a First Minister for All
- Yes to Irish language rights
- Yes to abortion rights
- Yes to integrated education

Sinn Féin will be defending, not re-negotiating the Good Friday Agreement now, or in the time ahead.

We will not be shifting any goalposts to satisfy unionism before, or after elections.

This is now about those of us who want to work together to make the Assembly, Executive and All-Ireland institutions work, to deliver on health, housing, education and jobs, to deliver social change and economic prosperity – taking advantage of our dual market access to the British and EU single markets.

We have delivered in the Executive to support workers and families.

Sinn Féin Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey has delivered the biggest shakeup of the housing system for over 50 years with plans to building 100,000 social and affordable homes.

Sinn Féin is also working to improve the planning system for rural communities.

Sinn Féin is working to strengthen **workers' rights** by introducing legislation to ban Zero Hour contracts; to give paid-leave to carers and supporting and widening paid leave for parents who have suffered bereavement.

Sinn Féin Finance Minister Conor Murphy has made paying workers the living wage a requirement for any company getting a government contract.

Sinn Féin wants to build a stronger and **fairer economy** and drive the potential of the all-Ireland economy to improve the quality of jobs and to raise incomes for workers north and south.

It is time for new leadership of the economy department.

The **rise in living costs** and fuel and electricity price hikes are placing huge pressure on workers and families.

Sinn Féin has delivered a £200 energy payment to over 280,000 people.

We have called on the Tories to scrap VAT on energy bills to cut household costs.

The British Chancellor's statement last week did little to help struggling households, and particularly those on universal credit and other benefits.

But we need to stay united and keep going at the Tories until we achieve change.

Sinn Féin Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey has binned the bedroom tax, to protect thousands of people from this cruel Tory tax.

Sinn Féin ministers are working every day to put money back in the pockets of ordinary people.

ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2022

On 5th May the most important election in a generation will take place.

I am delighted that Sinn Féin will be standing a total of 34 candidates, across all 18 constituencies.

Over 50% of Sinn Féin's candidates are female.

This election is about the future.

It is time for real change, and Sinn Féin is leading that change across Ireland.

Sinn Féin's priority is to make politics work, to demonstrate that real change is possible to lead that change.

Working together we can prioritise health, housing and education and use the protocol to create better jobs in a stronger economy.

We can build a modern progressive society based on fairness and equality.

DECADE OF OPPORTUNITY

A chairde, we are in a Decade of Opportunity, and Sinn Féin will not miss this moment.

While our past was divided, our future will be shared.

The GFA provides a peaceful and democratic path to achieving Irish unity.

Brexit has been a catalyst for change.

Attitudes are changing in the north. Fundamental demographic change is happening.

The choice now is between a narrow, an inward-looking Brexit Britain and an outward facing, inclusive modern Ireland in the EU.

In April 2017 the EU announced that in the event of Irish unity the island of Ireland will have an automatic route back to full EU membership.

CONCLUSION

A chairde, these are seminal times.

On fifth May this election has the potential to be bring about an historic and seismic shift in the political landscape.

Huge change is on the horizon. It's not enough to live through it, we must shape and lead it.

It is a time now for real change.

It's time for the big ideas.

But, most importantly it's time for the type of change that delivers the ambitions for each and every person who shares our island.

Go raibh maith agaibh.

ENDS