

Mary Lou McDonald TD delivers keynote address to Irish Unity Summit in New York

Sinn Féin Leader Mary Lou McDonald TD delivered a keynote address on March 1, 2024 to an Irish Unity Summit in Cooper Hall in New York.

Her full speech is below:

A chairde, is mór an onóir dom a bheith libh i Nua Eabhrac inniu chun todhchaí nahÉireann a phlé.

Ní mór dúinn na céimeanna deiridh ar an turais go Éire aontaithe a thogáil le chéile.

Friends,

To address you in the Cooper Union, a Hall that bore witness to the makers of American History is a great honour for me.

To stand at the very lectern at which Abraham Lincoln asserted the right of Congress to end slavery, in a place whose walls echo with the words of US Presidents, world leaders, and Irish Republicans.

They echo with the words of the great revolutionary and Easter Rising Leader, James Connolly who spoke here in September of 1902 and described himself as “an Irish agitator”.

I stand here, an Irish agitator, following in Connolly’s footsteps, dedicated to the cause of change, unity, prosperity, and Irish nationhood.

I want to thank the organisers of today’s forum for inviting me to speak.

The video tribute to Rita O’Hare was very moving.

Rita was a force a nature.

A leader.

A patriot who loved Ireland and our people.

She was our friend.

We loved her dearly and we miss her terribly.

I want to dedicate my words today to her.

Friends, we meet as we cross the threshold to springtime.

A time that symbolises renewal, hope, and the human instinct to forever begin.

A time that symbolises the light of change illuminating the way forward.

All of these instincts – renewal, hope and change – are at the very heart of nation building and at the very heart of the exciting journey to reunification and the achievement of a new Ireland in our time.

A journey that ends with the realisation of full nationhood.

Ireland – united and free – finally taking its rightful place amongst the nations of the world.

This is a journey that the United States has walked with Ireland for generations.

The bonds that tie our two countries together are not only those of friendship, they are also the bonds of family.

Bonds forged by the agonies of famine and the destitution of the coffin ships, of emigrants forced across the Atlantic in search of work, opportunity, and a better life in a new world.

In the land of the free.

These are the roots of Irish America.

The connection between Ireland and the US is the story of challenge, of perseverance, of hope, of endurance and success.

The US has been sanctuary for Irish people and those Irish who came here helped to build this nation and have made defining contributions to American society across literature, politics, business, arts, music, and sports.

The US kept faith with Ireland and played a central role in our national voyage that spans the struggle for independence, the pain of conflict, an emerging peace process that defied the odds, right through to the achievement of the historic Good Friday Agreement twenty-six years ago.

There would have been no Irish peace process without the United States.

When Brexit threatened Irish interests and our peace agreement, the US stepped up and stood-by Ireland.

That's what friends do.

That's what family does.

So, I ask that you walk with us now on the final length of the journey in common cause for peace, for reconciliation, for progress and prosperity.

For unity.

Seismic, generational change is underway in Ireland.

The old certainties are collapsing.

On February 3rd, Michelle O'Neill, Leas Uachtarán Shinn Féin, a republican woman from Co.

Tyrone took up the office of First Minister.

She pledged to be a First Minister for all and every day, she shows that she means it.

For the first time ever, we have a nationalist leading government in the north of Ireland, in a state designed and engineered to ensure that this could never happen.

A state designed and engineered to ensure a permanent Unionist majority.

That is now gone.

A republican party, Sinn Féin, leads the Executive and in Local government.

Combined Nationalism outpolls combined Unionism.

This is not to sound a bell of triumphalism.

Far from it.

It's merely to capture the depth of the change that is underway.

A new chapter of Irish history is being written.

Change is real, happening in real time.

It must be acknowledged, understood, and grasped bravely with both hands.

The great beauty of the peace we've built together is that we can hold differing and opposing views about the future, about constitutional change, and still work together to make life better for workers and families in the here and now.

The genius of the Good Friday Agreement is that it is a set of rules, principles, and

institutions to facilitate power sharing, to protect citizens' rights and to manage political difference.

It provides for unity referendums and obligates both the British and Irish governments to act on the outcome.

Placing the constitutional future of Ireland in the hands of the people, north and south, to be decided on that most sacred democratic principle – one person, one vote.

In the polling station, everyone will be equal, everyone will have their vote, everyone will have their say.

The outcome decided by a simple democratic majority.

Those are the rules.

As an Irish republican, I advocate for a United Ireland.

As an Irish republican, I see every single person who argues for the preservation of the Union with Britain, every person of British identity as an equal, no caveats or exceptions.

All equal.

To those citizens of the Unionist-British tradition, I say that we seek a future of partnership, equality, and progress with you.

The New Ireland we seek belongs every bit as much to the families of the Shankill as it does to the families of the Falls.

Every bit as much to the families of Ballymena as the families of Ballymun.

Imagine, for a moment, a new future free from a self-serving government in London.

Imagine all of us truly controlling our shared destiny.

One Ireland.

The Orange and the Green reconciled.

One nation.

All communities moving forward together to the future.

That's the dream.

As Maya Angelou wrote, 'History, despite it's wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.'

In the past, we have hurt each other.

There is an enormous power in stepping forward with an open heart and open hand of friendship to say sorry to each other.

We ask nobody to move on but we can move forward together.

The partition of Ireland failed from the start.

Failed all of us.

There has been a profound cost to partition politically, economically, and socially.

The policies implemented by the Tory government over the last decade have spelt disaster for the north, for Nationalist and Unionist alike.

Tory austerity has ravaged vital public services and damaged the lives of workers and families.

Tory governments in London never cared for the people of the north of Ireland.

Unionist Leader, Edward Carson called it in 1921 when he said, "What a fool I was.

I was only a puppet, and so was Ulster, and so was Ireland, in the political game that was to get the Conservative party into government.

Those words ring true today.

Friends, both the Irish and British government must face up to the reality that a momentous current of change is pulsing throughout Ireland.

Instead of driving divisive and insulting legacy legislation, the British government must play a constructive role in moving society forward.

The Irish government must lead.

The latest infrastructure funding commitments from Dublin are welcome, but we need to get serious about preparing and planning for constitutional change.

It's now imperative that the Irish government establishes a Citizens' Assembly to plan for Irish Unity, an Assembly where everyone is welcome, everyone is included, and everyone gets to share their ideas, their hopes, and their ambitions.

This week, Ireland's Future, a civic society organisation, published proposals for preparing for a unity referendum by the end of this decade.

I believe that this timeline is achievable.

More and more people are now seriously considering the future and the shape of constitutional change, and friends, the reunification of Ireland is firmly on the table.

In the south, this appetite for change has already seen the political landscape transformed.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael – the parties that have passed power between each other for over a century – no longer have everything their own way.

There's a new kid on the block.

Sinn Féin leads the opposition.

We do so with vision, determination, and energy.

And we're not stopping there.

We want to be in government.

We want to lead government.

A General Election is approaching, and our goal remains the formation of a government of change that puts reunification at the heart of our agenda.

A government with the drive to take Ireland's economic strength and dynamism to the next level by driving innovation,

by investing in higher education, research, and development

and by delivering a real plan for the achievement of energy independence by harnessing Ireland's abundant renewable resources.

A government that transforms our health service.

A government that builds homes.

One of the greatest duties of political leaders is to build nations in which young people can prosper.

In our young people, we have everything we need to chart a successful future for our country.

And I want to speak directly to them today.

There is no limit to your talent, ambition, and determination.

You work hard.

You can change Ireland and the world if you're given your chance.

Willy Loman, the central character in Arthur Miller's play 'Death of a Salesman' was not a young man.

But his painful lament of feeling "kind of temporary" about himself might well be the lament of so many of you today.

Unable to find an affordable home, living to work instead of working to live, and too many of you concluding that to get a real chance and the big opportunities, you must leave Ireland.

The truth is that you have been failed.

Failed by successive governments, particularly around housing.

We have a very strong economy but yours is the first generation that will be worse-off than your parents.

It's time to change all of that.

To renew the promise to you that you can step out into the world with confidence and pride, that you can realise the dream of home ownership, that you can build a good life and a prosperous future in Ireland.

I want to make that promise real for you.

So, to all of you who come to the US or Canada, who have ventured down under to Australia or New Zealand in search of a better life, to learn and to grow, I want to tell you that we are very proud of you.

Proud of everything that you experience and achieve.

And, when you're ready, we want you to come home.

We need you to come home.

We want you to pursue happiness at home, and with us build a new, united, prosperous Ireland together.

And I pledge to you that a new government, a government of change, will build the houses you need, deliver the services and opportunities you deserve, and create that pathway home.

Friends, the work of peace and nation building in Ireland cannot happen in splendid isolation.

We have known the brutality of colonialism and dispossession and the pain of conflict.

We know the value of peace.

Today, the beleaguered, besieged, impoverished refugee population of Gaza endure unimaginable suffering.

This vicious, criminal onslaught must stop now.

Those funding these atrocities must stop now.

All hostages must be released.

We need an immediate ceasefire and the renewal of a peace process grounded in international law, based on the two-state solution, with the aim of achieving self-determination and statehood for the Palestinians, and a secure Israel.

Even in the darkest of times, we must seek the light.

We must bring the light.

The success of the Good Friday Agreement teaches us that no conflict is intractable.

Peace is a question of will and peace must now be the united will of the international community.

Friends, the work of nation building, of uniting Ireland, is about creating a home where everyone belongs.

A nation is a collection of generations walking their length of the same journey.

Today, our generation holds the compass and the map.

The people of Ireland get to decide the direction we take, not only for ourselves but for everyone who comes after us.

The people of Ireland get to shape the future.

It's an awesome responsibility.

One that must inspire, motivate, and excite us.

Change is happening now, and we cannot let it pass us by.

For Ireland, the opportunity is just too great.

The saying goes, 'Society grows great when people plants trees in whose shade they will never sit.

But I believe that with every conversation, every debate, every initiative, we plant the seeds of a United Ireland that we will see in our lifetime.

Nation building is the task of dreamers, changemakers, future shapers.

Just imagine the dream comes to pass.

Imagine in ten years Ireland is united.

History will forever record that we were the generation that made Irish Unity a reality, the generation that made history.

I believe we must achieve it.

I believe we can achieve it.

I believe we will achieve it.

Together, and in our time, we will realise the dream, we will finish the journey, we will shape the future – a new, united Ireland, a nation home for all.