



**QUEEN'S
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**PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT**

Sinn Féin Vice-President Michelle O'Neill's speech at

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“WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE NORTH?”

PUBLIC LECTURE DELIVERED BY SINN FÉIN VICE-PRESIDENT MICHELLE O'NEILL
MLA, 17TH OCTOBER 2018, QUEENS UNIVERSITY BELFAST

INTRODUCTION

I want to thank the Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Professor Richard English, Ryan Feeney and Queen's University for the invitation to speak here this evening.

I would like to acknowledge the vital role that Queen's University plays in its contribution to society here, in terms of research and education, but also the regional economy.

It is a world-class University, one of the foremost higher education establishments on these islands and ranked in the top 200 universities in the world.

We are therefore proud that Queen's is one of our key selling points when working to attract foreign direct investors to locate here and the fact that the University is responsive to business, creating graduates with skills, competency and acumen in business-relevant areas.

Tonight I want to take the opportunity to speak about the future.

We live in peaceful, yet turbulent times politically.

So, what are the present realities and challenges we face and what does the future hold for the North?

PEACE PROCESS

In April past we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

This, despite our ongoing challenges, gave us all time to stop and reflect on what has been achieved, how over the past two decades the entire island of Ireland has been transformed as a result of the Irish peace process, where we have emerged from decades of political conflict and towards a more prosperous, peaceful and democratic society, of which this Agreement of 1998 is the very foundation stone.

The agreement was reached after the IRA cessation of 1994 which resulted in multiparty negotiations, forming the basis of a political agreement between the Irish and British Governments and the parties.

The agreement received overwhelming endorsement in referenda held North and South.

The Good Friday Agreement provided an end to conflict and provided a peaceful, democratic alternative and a huge opportunity for us all to design a better society for ourselves and future generations to live in.

The declaration by the parties at the start of the Agreement says, 'We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of the relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between these islands.'

When I reflect back to that time as a 21-year-old living in County Tyrone where we had endured a long conflict, grown up under British military occupation, witnessed first-hand the heartache of family, friends and neighbours being killed I recall the year of 1998 being one of optimism and a time filled with hope.

This was what motivated me to become active in politics and public life, and a desire to help build and shape the new future and opportunities before us.

Having served in the Assembly alongside unionists and those of a different cultural, religious and political tradition as myself I inevitably formed friendships with people on a human level, and political partnerships while working together to improve and deliver public services and a better quality of life for the people that we represent.

That partnership and friendship was no more epitomised in the relationship between the late Ian Paisley and the late Martin McGuinness while serving together in 2007 as First and deputy First Ministers.

After a turbulent number of years from 1998 to 2007 of the Assembly being up, then down, this period from 2007 once more gave everyone renewed hope.

There was a sense that these once arch opponents had come together and led us over a threshold into a new era and were making good on promises given and working together in good faith.

As the new Vice-President of the Sinn Féin I want to keep faith with that hope, drive change and get us back to rebuilding partnership and friendship in a working Assembly and Executive which allows us to open the door and let the future in.

I truly and passionately believe that we need to get back to the letter and spirit of the Good Friday Agreement.

It was, and remains a precious gift of peace to our young people and it is indispensable.

But I also recognise that peace alone is no longer good enough for a new generation who rightly demand to be afforded civil, social, economic and cultural rights in the year 2018 which are taken for granted and routine elsewhere on these islands, but unjustly denied here.

Much has changed and been achieved since the civil rights campaign of 1968 but to think that any minority or group in 2018 still has to fight for basic rights including women, LGBT, Irish speakers, ethnic minorities is simply not sustainable.

It is unjust in the modern era.

PRESENT REALITIES AND CHALLENGES

I won't rehearse the past 21 months of political breakdown and deadlock, deal and no deal, because I want to seek to focus on resolutions rather than recrimination, but while we are accustomed to crises, to disappointments and setbacks in this part of the world, it is imperative that we arrest the political drift that we are currently in and stop the attempts to unravel the Good Friday Agreement, its political institutions before it becomes unsalvageable.

Clearly that is a monumental challenge otherwise it would be done already.

There is no way of escaping the two present realities and challenges which are undermining any genuine attempt to restore the Executive at this time.

The first is an unwanted Brexit. This is being imposed against the wishes and best interests of people here.

The second is the DUP/Tory Confidence and Supply arrangement at Westminster where Theresa May's Government is wholly reliant on the DUP to stay in power, therefore prioritising this self-serving agenda over the peace and political processes.

And both of these realities are putting at risk our hard-won peace.

This deal with the DUP robbed Theresa May and her government of any pretence of impartiality in the negotiations for the restoration of the north's political institutions. The idea that her government could act as an honest broker while beholden to the DUP stretches credibility to breaking point.

Karen Bradley as British Secretary of State disgracefully moved to suspend her powers to call a future Assembly election because the courts were likely going to force her to do so, and disguised this by in tandem cutting MLA pay – something Sinn Féin told her to do over a year ago.

Why has she done this? Because the DUP did not want to face a court forced election while the RHI inquiry is running as they are exposed for incompetence, dysfunctionality and allegations of financial malpractice by the day.

At this time it is my absolute firm assessment that Karen Bradley has no plan to do anything to constructively aid the restoration of the Assembly.

The Sinn Féin leadership met Theresa May and Karen Bradley on Monday and we told them in plain terms that this is the case.

It is therefore the duty and responsibility of the Irish Government as co-guarantors of the Agreement and peace process to hold the British Government to their responsibilities and through the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference which will meet in a number of weeks in Dublin, insist, that together they arrest this situation of stasis and agree to remove the obstacles to restoring the Executive.

This can be done, should be done and must be done without delay.

This could pave the way for a new Executive.

What nationalism expects to see is that the equality, mutual respect and all-Ireland approaches enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement are fully embraced by the DUP.

That the negative attitude and disrespect to Irish national identity and culture is consigned to the past and those who wish to live their lives through the medium of the Irish language can do so and have protection before the law.

That prejudice felt by women, the LGBT community and ethnic minorities not only stops, but is prevented by government, rather than facilitated.

The public deserve to have functioning government and one which they can have confidence in.

It would also be hard to find anyone inside or outside this room who does not believe that reform of how the Assembly and Executive and our body politic operates is a necessity, not a choice.

Every government wrestles with difficult and complex challenges, and we are no different, but the basic norms of power-sharing, parity of esteem and principles of the Good Friday Agreement must be accepted and embraced by everyone in order for us to succeed.

This means:

- Discharging our duties in good faith;
- Serving all of the people equally;
- Preventing discrimination;
- Promoting the interests of the whole community;
- Upholding our commitment to genuine power-sharing, respect and mutual trust towards one another;
- It means actively promoting reconciliation, and building bridges we can all cross to end sectarianism and bigotry at every level of society.

I want an Assembly which operates differently from what went before, and to usher in a new kind of politics, which is progressive, respectful, and has integrity.

Public confidence must be earned and trust rebuilt if the Assembly and Executive is going to have any credibility.

Any new Executive should in my view be an inclusive partnership coalition Government.

Never ever again can we see scandals like Red Sky, NAMA, RHI happen in this place.

It is totally unacceptable and unethical behaviour.

We need civil service reforms and proper checks and balances too.

Whatever the civil service's role has been in contributing to the RHI debacle, nobody doubts that it has a critical role in ensuring there is never a repeat, therefore we must look at serious reforms.

We need ministers competent to do their jobs.

We need legislative reform to ensure that Special Advisors operate in an accountable and lawful fashion if we are to uphold the highest standards in public office.

We need open government where decisions and how they are taken and in whose interests are laid bare and properly scrutinised day and daily with no hiding place for any risk of malpractice or cronyism.

Can this be done?

Yes, of course it can.

We all need to know that if we were to re-enter talks that those participating have the political will to reach agreement; have the mandate and authority to actually take decisions; and know what it is they are looking for – each party brings their own issues, and every party has issues they want resolved.

Progress is and has always been possible.

If there is political will, there is surely a way!

BRITISH WITHDRAWAL FROM THE EU

Brexit was not our choice and it is unwanted by the majority of people and parties in the North.

There is no good that come from Brexit for Ireland North or South.

Throughout our peace process the European Union has been a critical partner for peace providing substantial political and financial aid which has led to greater economic and social progress on an all-island basis.

The Brexit crisis is deepening, it is unprecedented, it is chaotic and how it will pan out is unpredictable to everyone at this point.

As the Brexit negotiations enter the critical final phase, outstanding issues remain to be resolved, not least the question of the Irish 'backstop' and the nature of the future relationship between Britain and the European Union.

If a deal is reached there remain a number of challenges to overcome, including obtaining the consent of the Westminster Parliament for any final deal.

These issues all raise profound questions, not only for the North of Ireland and the EU, but also for the future of the Union itself.

The majority of MLAs elected are anti-Brexit.

We are mandated to defend the North's interests.

The DUP are isolationists and on the wrong side of the argument and the democratic will of people here who voted to remain.

They support Brexit at the cost of imposing a hard border or as Nelson McCausland said, 'a Brexit at any cost'.

Arlene Foster insists that the DUP will not accept any deal that introduced new regulatory differences between the North and Britain, and that this 'red line is blood red' for the DUP.

We must avoid economic apartheid on this island and a hard border.

Michel Barnier has said that checks are unavoidable if the erection of a physical border is to be prevented, and that the EU wishes to make them not too burdensome in particular for smaller businesses.

He says that their proposal limits itself to what is absolutely necessary to avoid a hard border – customs procedures and the respect for EU standards for products.

It does not include measures on free movement of EU citizens, services, healthcare or social and environmental policy, but gives the North of Ireland benefits that no other third country enjoys, including access to the EU single market for goods and continued benefits from EU Free Trade Agreements, and the continuation of the Single Electricity Market.

The proposed 'backstop' is a safety net and insurance policy.

The Common Travel Area in the event of a Brexit deal or none, will continue to allow British and Irish citizens only in Britain and on the island of Ireland associated rights and entitlements including access to employment, healthcare, education, social benefits, as well as the right to vote in certain elections.

Brexit cannot be considered an Orange and Green issue and I think there is considerable merit in all of us looking at post-Brexit Rights and Entitlements through a new lens.

There is obvious value in a Bill of Rights for the North as referred to in the Good Friday Agreement, in mitigating the potential rights impacts of Brexit.

There is also value in a Charter of Rights for the whole island also referred to in the Good Friday Agreement.

This would also support the provision in the Agreement on equivalence of rights on the island.

We along with the SDLP, Alliance and Greens want the North to remain within the customs union and single market, we want to preserve the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, protect human rights and together make clear that the 'backstop' is the bottom line to protect our future economic stability.

Together we met EU Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier on 5 October as the majority voice for people in the North of Ireland.

He assured us that the backstop would apply, unless and until, another solution is found.

Chequers fails to offer another solution and Michel Barnier has been clear on that.

Sinn Féin is arguing for the North's unique and special circumstances to be recognised within the EU.

A special status relationship outside of the EU would do little to deal with the massive political, social and economic challenges thrown up by Brexit.

As a former Agriculture Minister I am acutely aware of the critical importance of the agri-food sector to our economy and it is uniquely vulnerable to the loss of EU funding and potential tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade.

For example, almost 30% of the North's milk is processed in the South, which also receives 40% of our live lamb exports.

We all know that Brexit poses major challenges to agriculture but also to manufacturing, retail, hospitality, higher education, tourism, energy – all sectors will be impacted negatively.

We know that the fluctuating euro-sterling exchange rate will be compounded if there are additional trade tariff costs imposed on business, which some firms could find it impossible to keep trading.

Impacts on trade and employment and the need for competitiveness and innovation are all amplified.

When trying to attract investors we talk about our strategic location to British and European markets.

We talk of our skilled workforce; our competitive operating costs; our advanced infrastructure.

These things are at risk because of Brexit.

The EU helps fund much of what we take for granted.

To retain our economic competitiveness we cannot incur additional trade costs, and need to retain access to labour and skills.

I firmly believe that we need to develop and nurture, build and grow the All-Ireland economy where we develop closer regimes and models of integration.

In light of Brexit it is imperative that the island of Ireland redoubles our efforts to develop and rebuild a modern, competitive and sustainable economy where we open doors to trade, investment, tourism and jobs but also develop and invest in our indigenous industries.

We need to improve our competitiveness through investing in our public services and infrastructure.

EU support clearly helps us to do these things and brings massive economic and social benefits.

These programmes are important drivers of regional development in a cross-border context and allow for practical support of the Peace Process and the advancement of the Good Friday Agreement.

As the most obvious symbol of the Peace Process, the invisible border on the island of Ireland is essential.

Prior to the Good Friday Agreement, security checkpoints on the border, British Army military installations, which had been built and reinforced from the 1970s onwards, were symbols of division and conflict.

The demilitarisation of physical border crossings and checkpoints is both a symbol of and a dividend from the success of the Peace Process.

People's daily lives in the border region have been transformed.

Any reversal will have huge adverse economic, social, political, security, but also psychological impacts on people both in border communities and on the island as a whole.

Brexit represents the greatest economic threat to the island of Ireland in a generation.

I fully respect the right of the British people to leave the EU and I wish them well – However, I am absolutely opposed to the British Government dragging us out of the EU against our will.

Sinn Féin have influenced and made our case to the EU27 in the Dáil and the European Parliament.

We will continue to make our voices heard and to build a progressive coalition around our national interest in the coming weeks ahead.

REFERENDUM ON A UNITED IRELAND

There is a growing sense that circumstances are rapidly changing which will inevitably lead to the final break-up of the constitutional structures of the United Kingdom which Theresa May and the DUP say they are committed to preserving.

The Sinn Féin leadership met with the British Prime Minister and the British Secretary of State in London on Monday. We have made it clear that in the case of a Brexit crash-out and no deal scenario that it is absolutely incumbent on them to put the constitutional future to the people here through a unity referendum.

Their planned imposition of Brexit in Ireland once again demonstrates the failure of partition, and exposes further the gaping democratic deficit inherent in a partitioned Ireland.

People from across this society, and yes even those of a British identity, are questioning what will be the merits, benefits of staying within the union after Brexit.

The EU has said in the event of reunification the whole of Ireland will automatically be subsumed back into the EU.

So the debate on our constitutional future is as much about our relationship with Europe as it is about Ireland itself.

The Good Friday Agreement provides a peaceful democratic pathway to Irish Unity.

The issue of Irish Unity has taken on a new dynamic because of Brexit.

Demographics are changing and so too is the political landscape.

This cannot be ignored.

Peter Robinson's remarks here at Queen's University when he gave his own lecture back in June acknowledge this.

The Good Friday Agreement gives people the opportunity and choice to decide our future together.

How we live together.

How we work together.

How we share this island together.

The political momentum on change is moving in that direction.

Sinn Féin wants a New Ireland, a fairer Ireland, and a united Ireland.

But we do not claim to own the debate.

I have absolutely no doubt that there are many, many within the unionist community who look at Brexit with the same fear and trepidation as nationalists and republicans.

A Unity Referendum is coming and we need to be prepared for it.

There is a duty on all of us to prepare for it.

All options must be on the table as we shape the future.

There is no contradiction in declaring and delivering on our firm commitment to power sharing with unionism and a functioning Assembly while also initiating a mature and inclusive debate about new political arrangements which better serve all of us who share this island.

Similarly, there is no contradiction in unionism working the existing constitutional arrangements while taking its rightful place in the conversation about what a New Ireland would look like.

It is a time to hear all voices within this debate.

We must continue our journey of dialogue, of listening, of sharing ideas because in the New Ireland we speak of, there can only be a victory for us all.

CONCLUSION

I want to thank you for taking the time to come here this evening and hear what I have to say.

I want to finish by saying this:

The debate on our constitutional future actually threatens no one, therefore let's have it in a mature and rational manner.

What has brought us together as a community divided by identity and allegiance has been the Good Friday Agreement, so let's defend it and not allow others to rip it, or us apart and recognise that it is indispensable.

Let's try and reinvent the optimism and hope we have all witnessed before by turning a corner and creating a new kind of politics which is democratic, energetic and progressive and which allows everyone irrespective of identity, nationality, race, colour, creed, disability, gender or sexual orientation – to feel that they belong – let's get down to business and design a better society and economy for ourselves and future generations to live in.

A shared history does not mean a shared memory or even experience of the past, but:

We can determine and create a shared future together

We can open doors and we can let this future in.

We must give people hope and our young people opportunity.

This is the most defining period since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Change is happening.

Dialogue is crucial.

We need courage not chaos.

We must choose hope over fear.

Thank you for listening.

Go raibh maith agaibh go leor.