

Michelle Gildernew MP
Speech to the LAOH Convention Pittsburgh
Final Copy 15th July 2022

Failte raibh agus go raibh maith agaibh to Karen, Delores, and Marlyn for the invite to meet with you over the convention and to address this plenary session.

It is an honour to address so many inspirational women. Women who have kept the faith with Ireland and the cause of Irish Unity.

Women bound together by a sense of community, history, and pride in their Irish American heritage.

And there is much to be proud of.

Too long written out of history, women have always led at home and in the US.

We remain the most unmanageable of revolutionaries.

I'm thinking of one woman in particular, who bridged the Atlantic. An unrepentant Irish Republican.

Sydney Gifford, sister of Grace Gifford, who was made famous by the song 'Grace'.

Sydney came to New York just before the 1916 Rising.

Her job was to raise awareness and funds for the coming fight.

She was a working journalist but had to write under the assumed name of John Brennan as editors believed that journalism was no place for a woman.

Her articles were carried across the states and provided vital updates on developments in Ireland.

A rallying call for a revolutionary generation.

In the lead-up to the Rising, she established Cumann na mBan in New York.

While men were debating and talking about the Rising, Sydney was acting and raising volunteers.

LAOH members joined en mass with Sydney and swelled the ranks of Cumann na mBan. The time for talking was over.

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She hand-stitched an Irish Tricolour and flew it from the top of a trolley bus on 5th Avenue in Easter week.

The first time the flag of the Irish Republic had been unfurled in the US.

The role of the LAOH and women in struggle did not begin and end with Sydney Gifford.

In every generation since, women have led. Our struggle owns a debt of gratitude to Irish America and to women who protested, raised funds, and engaged America in our struggle for unity and independence.

We are closer to achieving that goal than at any time in our history. Irish unity is achievable by wholly democratic and peaceful means.

North and South the old ways are ending. The parties of the past delivered partition, poverty, exclusion and conflict.

It was women that bore the brunt of the denial of rights, inequality and discrimination.

It was women who picked up the pieces of homes destroyed by loyalist murder gangs, who suffered imprisonment, theirs and that of their partners and children. Women who died as a result of the war. Women like Sheena Campbell, Mairead Farrell and Kathleen O'Hagan.

Ni Saoirse go Saoirse na mban. There is no freedom without the freedom of women.

We are looking to the future. Sinn Féin is led by two women and in the last election in the north over 50 percent of our MLA's are women.

Our party president Mary Lou McDonald, is the first woman to lead the official opposition in the Dáil. We hope to see her become the first woman Taoiseach.

In the North, our Vice President Michelle O'Neill is the first Irish Republican to hold the position of First Minister.

This is a state that was gerrymandered to ensure no catholic, never mind an Irish Republican would lead it.

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Sinn Féin is the largest party North and South. But we have bigger plans. We want to build a new and united Ireland. A place that is home to all. That is equal and prosperous. One in which the potential of all is realized.

With your continued support, we can make it happen.

But in Dublin, we have an Irish Government that refuses to plan for Irish Unity.

Parties that have prospered under 100 years of partition and division want to hold on to their last vestiges of power.

That can never be in the best interests of the people or realizing the will of the Irish People as stated in the Constitution.

They are out of ideas, out of time, and held together only by their shared opposition to change.

They are on the wrong side of history.

A unity referendum as provided for by the Good Friday Agreement is coming. They should prepare now.

Be sure that a Sinn Féin-led government will prepare and advocate for Unity.

We will convene a citizen's assembly to plan for the future.

And we will include "our exiled children in the US"

We will face challenges, in particular from a British Government that has no place or care for Ireland, our people our economy, and our agreements.

This British Government is set to continue the coverup of its actions in Ireland. Summary execution of Irish Republicans, repression, imprisonment, and torture were their rule of law. The arming, directing, and cover-up of collusion was their policy.

They unilaterally introduced legislation in Westminster to end judicial investigations, to refuse inquests, and block victims from accessing the courts. They have offered an amnesty at the request of their military.

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The people who murdered with impunity in Derry on Bloody Sunday, in Springhill and Westrock. In Aghnacloy when they shot Aidan McAnespie on his way to a GAA match at Aghaloo O'Neill's, or in South and East Tyrone in the "murder triangle".

These moves are opposed by Sinn Féin and all other parties, the Irish Government, victim's groups, human rights experts, and the position of both houses of Congress.

They cannot and must not succeed. Reconciliation can never be built on coverups and the denial of truth and justice.

The British Government has also acted unilaterally to introduce legislation to grant themselves the power to rewrite an international agreement on Brexit.

This is of course illegal. But Britain has always believed itself to be above the law.

Their actions, the denial of rights, the breaking of agreements, and the breaching of international law demonstrate to a new generation in Ireland and around the world that we are dealing with a rogue state.

Activists in this room should speak with one voice. How can you have a trade agreement or normal diplomatic relations with a government that does not honour agreements or respects international law.

A government that kills and covers up its murderous actions. A government that continues to deny the rights of citizens.

Many have asked "Will the end of Boris Johnson herald change?" The answer is clearly no.

In the week that Johnson was forced to resign from his party all the contenders for leadership voted in favour of their Brexit and Legacy legislation.

A new lick of paint will make no difference.

I want to see the end of Westminster imposing its will on any part of Ireland. While we deal with the symptoms of British Government policy in Ireland we must also look to the cure.

A New and united Ireland.

Irish unity is the future and the increasing choice of the people north and south.

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The old absolute unionist majority is gone. The future is ours to determine.

We all need to act to maximize support for Irish Unity. To secure and win unity referenda.

As always, support from the US will be critical. With your support, we will realize the dream of many of your mothers, grandmothers, and all who came before.

The reason that Congress in the US has the back of the Agreement is because of the work of organisations like the LAOH and the AOH have done over generations.

It is your pressure, lobbying and persuasion that ensures that powerful people in the US support Irish Unity. Never forget that.

I look forward to welcoming you to a united Ireland.

Until then we have work to do, much to build and deliver.

I hope that we can continue to rely on your support.

Beir Bua.

Up the rebels and the most unmanageable of revolutionaries.

Words 1308