

# *PRESIDENTIAL SPEECH*

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## ***Introduction***

Trinity Conference centre might not seem the likeliest setting for a trade union conference. But a brief glance at past graduates of the University indicates it was fertile ground for a number of figures who contributed to the shaping of our political, social and economic landscape and whom we can either praise or blame for their influence on the Ireland of today.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Edmund Burke, whose statue greets visitors through the main gates of the College is considered to be the father of modern British conservatism and who decried the French revolution as representing ‘the glory of Europe [being] extinguished for ever’.

All will remember the infamous words of the virtuous philosopher.

*“when bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle”.*

We can all read a little into that today.

Later in the century another graduate, Irish revolutionary Wolfe Tone, inspired by the ideals of the French revolution, established the United Irishmen and played a key role in the 1798 rebellion.

From the historic to the contemporary we find courageous leaders and champions of just causes.

Senator David Norris, trade unionist and civil rights activist succeeded in 1988 in decriminalising homosexuality, a bigoted law which had brought about the downfall of another Trinity graduate, Oscar Wilde. This activism laid the groundwork for the Marriage Equality victory.

Kadar Asmal law lecturer in at Trinity College for 27 years, teacher of human rights, labour and international law. A founder of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, he returned to South Africa as a member of the ANC negotiating team and served as a Minister in the first ANC Government after the advent of democracy.

The college also boasts 3 former Presidents of Ireland,

Douglas Hyde, the First President of Ireland,

Mary Robinson, first female President of Ireland, and UN Commissioner for Human rights and Chair of The Elders, a forceful advocate for gender equality. Mary Robinson will address the conference on Wednesday.

And Mary McAleese, eighth President of Ireland who did so much to repair north south relations.

It is a fitting gathering place for the largest civic society organisation on the island of Ireland, whose over 700,000 members relentlessly pursue a better and fairer society. You their representatives, gather here to focus on priorities for working people and their families as we face into to end of the second decade of the 21st century.

It is clear that economic recovery of recent years has been uneven and has not reduced inequality. Working people continue to pay an enormous price where living standards have plateaued and corporate profits and equity returns continue to rise. There remains much to be done to correct this imbalance. Our work has never been more important, protecting hard-won rights and ensuring every

worker, North and South can benefit from decent work and decent lives.

### ***Commemoration***

This decade is also one of significant commemoration, re-examining the transformative events of the last century .

In our own trade union family we celebrated a number of important birthdays. We marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ICTU as a significant one movement, all island body, unified in our efforts on behalf of working people and their communities. Ruaidhri Roberts and Leo Crawford who served as Joint Secretaries of ICTU until 1966 were healers of a historic and unfortunate division within our movement Ruaidhri Roberts also had a huge commitment to workers' education, becoming President of the People's College and one of its great advocates. The People's College celebrated its 70th anniversary last year.

The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation had its centenary celebration, the Association of Higher Civil and Public Servants

celebrated 75 years. In my own union, the INTO, we concluded our celebration of our 150 years of advocacy and our sister union, the Ulster Teachers Union celebrated 100 years.

The **ILO celebrates** its 100th **anniversary** as an important global organisation for the world of work .

We also acknowledge developments in our affiliates as this year marks the first anniversary of the newly amalgamated union FORSA and the newly amalgamated Connect, demonstrating that affiliates adapt and grow to meet the challenges which lie ahead.

### ***Our mission***

Our strength lies in the solidarity and support of our 700,000 strong members. Our movement, is more important than ever. In a nation of deep inequalities, in a global world of economic and political calamity, who will stand up for workers and their families if not us? It's not easy. Complacency is easy.

We are fortunate as a republic to have a strong trade union advocate as head of state. President Michael D. Higgins, in reflecting on our purpose at our 2017 gathering declared to us:

‘Yours is a great tradition. Yours is a powerful emancipatory, genuinely progressive force, capable of engaging all challenges and bringing what is struggling to be born into being’.

That is our starting point today.

### ***The Democratic Programme***

2019 marks the centenary of the First Dáil which met right around the corner in 1919. A significant element of that first Dáil was the adoption of ‘*The First democratic programme*’. Tom Johnson of the Irish Trade Union Congress was its chief author and while much has debated about the Programme, it was nonetheless a remarkable document for its time. It set out what was meant by a Republic with a powerful declaration of the rights *and duties* of citizens.

In less than 600 words it laid out the principles on which the Irish Republic was to be built – those of Liberty, Equality and Justice for all

–where each citizen would receive an adequate share of the produce of the nation’s labour and where the government’s first duty would be to ensure the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of every child. It outlined the basic set of principles and a form of social contract on which the new state would be built.

100 years later and it remains one of the most progressive documents to be put before Dáil Éireann and serves as a reminder of the unrealised promises of the new state.

### ***Housing***

Sadly as we gather today, a central aspiration of that programme remains in tatters. Our state stands indicted over a housing crisis borne of the very antithesis of the first democratic programme, which stated, ‘we reaffirm that all right to private property must be subordinated to the public right and welfare’.

In today’s terms we could turn it on its head and say that the guiding principle of government is

“that public rights and welfare be subordinated to the right to private property”.

The cranes are back on the skyline but serving the interests of vulture funds who are hoovering up all available land and property and commanding prices beyond the reach of most. Working people and their families are struggling to rent, buy or find secure roofs over their heads.

The outcome – a locked out generation.

The figures makes for depressing reading.

House prices here in Dublin are on average between nine and fourteen times the average salary. Prices nationally have increased 80 per cent since the low point of the recession.

Half of the counties in the state are unaffordable for first time buyers on average incomes;

Young workers are now struggling to cover their housing costs.

Young workers tell us they have lost confidence in ever being able to buy a home of their own.

Soaring rent prices reveal a problem that's getting worse. It's boom time for landlords and bust time for those seeking the security of their own home.

The share of households living in private rented accommodation has doubled in size in the last twenty years. In another 20 years this is projected to double again.

If we don't act, in our lifetime, just as it was in historic times, home ownership will once again be the privilege of the minority.

This is not just a post-recession legacy but a consequence of trends underway for over twenty years - a creeping commodification of the very basic right to housing and a withdrawal of the state from provision of a public housing programme. The provision of rent supplements for private renters over the provision of public housing and long term cost rental provision has worsened the situation.

Deliberate political choices.

Worst of all the crisis has contributed to a scale of homelessness that should be a source of deep shame to our government. That over

10,000 people including 3,000 children remain homeless is not just scandalous; it is harmful and damaging to the individuals and families concerned. And those figures do not include overcrowding in existing households.

Childhood spent in hotel rooms or hubs with little or no privacy, adults and children sharing cramped spaces - a lack of space that hinders normal childhood development.

The depth of the emergency prompted the United Nations to launch a scathing attack on the Irish governments housing policy.

In a damning indictment, the UN Special Rapporteur on Housing lambasted the government. She wrote *“to express concern with respect to your Government’s practice of adopting laws and policies which treat **housing as a commodity and undermine the enjoyment of housing as a human right**”*.

This view was echoed in the recent report from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission which criticises current government policy and states unequivocally that it is exacerbating the problem.

Lack of access to affordable quality homes constitutes a significant crisis for workers, families and communities in the Republic of Ireland.

Current Government plans are wholly insufficient to make a significant impact. Pressure and strain on individuals and families is a direct consequence of the state choosing a market led response over state led investment over many, many years.

The figures speak for themselves.

In 1975, the State – working through local authorities – built 8,794 new homes. Last year that figure was a mere 838.

The danger now is the ‘normalisation’ of the problem.

But we in ICTU have not backed away from our obligation to fight for the right to housing for our members and our communities. We have taken a lead in campaigning and will continue to press for change.

Particularly in the run up to the next election.

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We have set out a clear policy and campaigning platform on housing.

We need to see recognition of the housing crisis from government.

And a fundamental policy shift on the part of government.

We need to see an investment in social and affordable housing.

Working together under the banner of Raise the Roof, we have built a strong coalition of NGOs and political parties and challenged government policy as misguided, unfit for purpose and failing our workers.

We brought our members together for major national and regional rallies, to share the frustration our members feel. We can be proud of the intergenerational solidarity demonstrated.

We secured a dáil motion, and we are now gathering signatories for our demand to a legal right to Housing.

This right currently exists in more than 81 countries worldwide. This is a critical measure that would help resolve the current housing emergency and ensure that everybody can access decent quality accommodation, suitable to their needs.

We must learn lessons from other cities who have struggled with this problem. If they can build social and affordable housing at scale, then why not here?

Working together, we can and we must challenge government policy until we start to see these figures going the right way.

## ***Changing nature of work***

The world of work is changing at pace but often accompanied by a deterioration in working conditions

Digitalisation, artificial intelligence, the gig economy, and insecure work.

Our role is not to stand in the way of progress.

But progress has to mean the same thing to everyone. When someone can work full time and struggle to pay their rent, their childcare or other basic needs, something is wrong.

Lowering pension entitlements sows the seeds of inequality for a generation that will find itself impoverished in retirement. A two tier health system, privatisation of early years care and education, higher transport costs, underinvestment in public services all diminish the lives of workers and their families.

Wages and conditions of employment remain our top priority but must be combined with enhancing the non-pay returns to workers,

through the "social wage". A social wage is key to promoting equality and a mechanism for distributing wealth. By European standards our social wage is low. If we are to build quality universal public services we cannot erode our tax base.

The notion of lowering the tax base for workers has superficial appeal but in effect is giving with one hand and taking more with the other by transferring the cost of basic services back to the individual. A deliberate sleight of hand that ICTU rejects. Paying for services such as child care or securing health insurance eat up multiples of any reduced income tax.

Boosting the social wage comes at a substantial cost. ICTU has rightly argued that the overall level of revenue collected by the state should be protected and expanded and has set out coherent costed models to demonstrate how it can be done.

It's about choices.

## ***Gender pay gap***

Together, we can secure services at a higher level. But only together.

We must continue to challenge the gender pay gap in our society.

Ireland's gender pay gap has increased. Men get paid 14 per cent more than women in this country. But that only focuses on one aspect of the inequality.

Vertical inequality persists.

Women tend to dominate lower paid sectors such as childcare, caring sectors and hospitality, and men tend to dominate in the higher paid roles. The gender pay gap is compounded by part-time work often driven by child minding responsibilities in the absence of affordable childcare.

A Congress report notes "Women .. are working in a system that was designed by one gender for one gender and in the absence of a system that promotes gender equality, women and families take

rational decisions to work part time and reduce hours in order to care for children. It is not unsurprising that such a system provides huge advantages for those not expected to disengage from the workplace – mainly men.”

ICTU campaigning in this area has seen some improvements in family leave and how it can be taken. And will continue to unapologetically fight for better care and family leave in order to produce a system that provides real choices for workers regardless of gender.

Organising and collective bargaining in those gendered sectors of low pay is a critical component of this work and affiliates are to be commended for the initiatives in these areas.

### ***Collective bargaining***

While inequalities in Ireland and Europe grow, the share of national income that goes to wages has fallen dramatically.

Unions are finding unlikely allies in unlikely places. The IMF, OECD and ECB are voicing concern about income inequality and calling for

inclusive growth, identifying concerns that increases in company profits are not making their way into workers' wages, and are not reaching the real economy at a local level either. No news to us. This was not always the case. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has criticised wage stagnation despite falling unemployment in the EU. And the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found income inequality at "record-high levels" and stressed the need for "inclusive growth". Furthermore, the IMF has specifically identified the decline in trade union organisation as one of the main reasons for the growth in inequality (globally, just eight men own the same wealth as the poorest 50% of the population). The challenge now is to rebalance the share of profits in a way that provides broad gains for workers.

The damage caused by valuing growth above equality in rich societies can be seen all around us. Inequality causes shorter, unhealthier and unhappier lives; and its function as a driver of

consumption depletes the planet's resources. Inequality damages the social fabric of the whole society.

And the key to reducing inequality and meeting the challenges of a changing world of work is to promote collective bargaining as a key lever for fair economic growth.

Having a strong voice such as Esther Lynch as Deputy General Secretary of the ETUC will add firepower to ICTUs important work in this area.

There is ample evidence of the success of trade union collective bargaining in improving living standards and eroding inequality.

The rewards are well documented. Inclusive growth and greater levels of economic equality are associated with better health and life expectancy, greater social cohesion and lower levels of crime.

Ensuring economic equality is a matter of political will and depends on political choices. All boats do not rise without mechanisms for fair sharing of wealth.

### ***Northern Ireland***

Brexit is a darkening cloud over the island of Ireland.

The risk to employment is enormous in the context of a crash out and the negative knock on effect on the economy has been well aired. While the future direction of our major trading partner is out of our control, ICTU has been forceful in its demand for contingency planning for vulnerable employment through a Brexit adjustment fund. In the context of a no-deal scenario, the early demand by ICTU to abandon proposed tax cuts has finally been accepted by government.

Brexit poses grave challenges to our affiliates in the North;

The devolved industrial relations and employment law has given unions a degree of shelter from the anti- trade union practices of

successive Tory governments. Nonetheless, working conditions where almost a third of workers earn below the Real Living Wage, a pay cap for public servants (although union persistence looks set to remove it) needs significant improvement. Protection of workers rights in a post Brexit scenario is vital. The excellent work done in the *Better Work Better Lives* wide ranging campaign sets the scene for Social Dialogue in a restored assembly. ICTU has created a tangible visible and constructive process of civic engagement through this campaign. Providing hope where uncertainty existed.

The political vacuum continues to undermine an increasingly fragile peace process. The murder of Lyra McKee reminds us of the deadly consequences.

The restoration of the assembly and the protection of Good Friday agreement is our priority including, 21 years on, the implementation of the Bill of Rights.

***Celebrating our victories***

Colleagues we can and should celebrate some key victories in recent times.

When we challenged the low rate of VAT in the hospitality sector, which wasn't going into the wages of hard working members in the sector, we succeeded. €500 million back for the exchequer.

The scourge of zero -contracts was not tolerated by ICTU and a five year relentless campaign bore significant legislative fruit.

They said pigs might fly first but the extraordinary effort that secured trade union recognition in Ryanair is a testament to what this movement can do when we set our minds to it. I want to congratulate FORSA for your success.

When journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey were arrested following their investigative work into the Loughinisland massacre, our colleagues in the NUJ leapt to their defence.

Our commitment to international solidarity has ensured valuable support for the people of Palestine and our trade unions colleagues

in Colombia. Individual affiliates do enormous work through their members through a wide range of solidarity projects- all making a difference.

These victories show what we can do when we work together for the greater good of our members.

As we look to the future, it's critical we ensure all workers can engage in collective bargaining. Both here in Ireland and at an EU level, we must support the adoption of legislation that strengthens social dialogue and the right of all workers to engage in collective bargaining.

Our movement has faced challenges well in the past. We will rise to the challenge of Brexit and the potential challenge to workers' rights which may arise. We will rise to the challenge of Trumpism, and those who seek economies for the markets and not the people. We will continue to be a voice for working people because it is the right and just thing to do.

100 years from now our victories will be celebrated.

