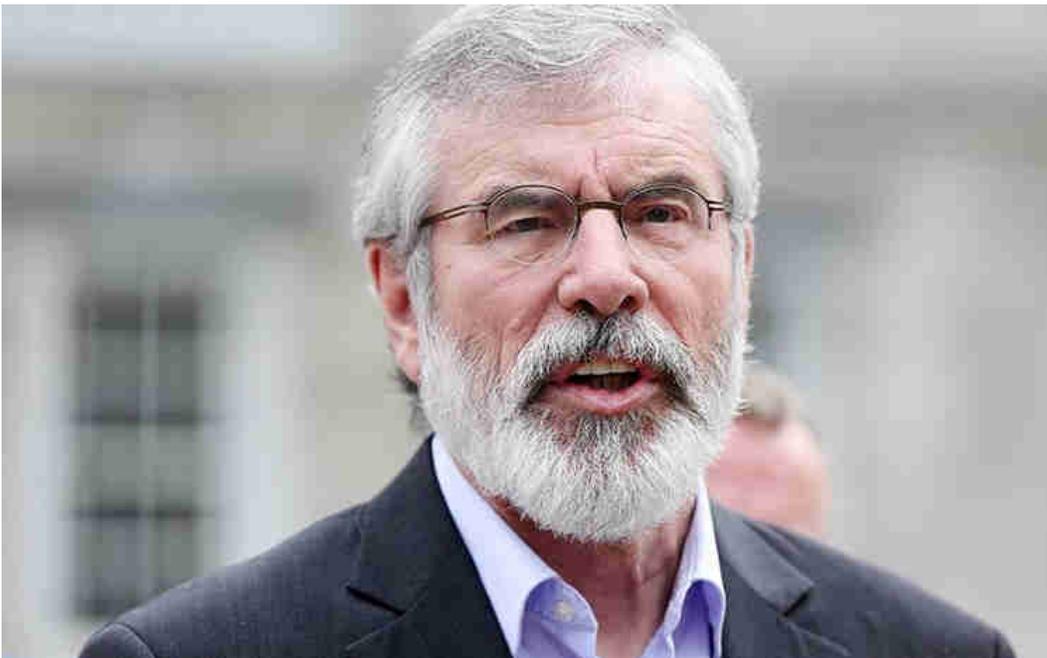


Major And Wide Ranging Interview With Gerry Adams

In a major and wide ranging new interview in the Irish News Gerry Adams reflects on Irish Unity, the British Government proposals on covering up the past and his love of writing.

This interview was conducted by John Manley and published in the Irish News.



GERRY Adams believes the Dublin government should immediately kick-start planning for a united Ireland and that a border poll could happen within as little as three years.

The former Sinn Féin leader told The Irish News that concurrent referendums on both sides of the border should be preceded by a "process of consultation, of planning, of inclusivity".

He says Sinn Féin wants to see a citizens' assembly and constitutional convention that "has to happen nationally", alongside an examination of the cost of unity and the potential for an island-wide health service.

In an interview with The Irish News following the release of his latest collection of short stories, *Black Mountain*, he says even the flag and the anthem can be on the agenda in future discussions about a new Ireland.

But Mr Adams (72) claims the current Dublin administration doesn't want a border poll because it will signal the "death knell for the cosy politics".

Notably, the former West Belfast MP suggests that DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson need not engage with any formal process ahead of a border poll.

However, he urges the Lagan Valley MP, who has emerged as his party's leader after months of internal upheaval, to work in partnership with Sinn Féin at Stormont.



"I wouldn't expect him (Sir Jeffrey) to deal necessarily with a united Ireland but the future of Ireland - what is the future?"

"So he is committed to the Good Friday Agreement, he says, he's committed to the all-Ireland infrastructure, east-west arrangements, and he

must know it makes sense to have those harmonious, synchronised cross-border initiatives and agencies - he knows all that. All unionism can do is delay."

The republican figurehead says he does not accept that a border poll will not happen within five years and suggests it could be as little as three years after the planning process gets underway.

"If the Irish government decided now, as a matter of policy, that it was going to go for a referendum, then the timing of a referendum would also be part of that process and the timing should be set by the process of planning and consultation that's put in place," he says.

Mr Adams also said he is "not in the least bit surprised" at the British government's recently revealed plan to introduce a statute of limitations for Troubles offences.

The former Sinn Féin leader describes Boris Johnson as a "glype, a chancer, a little Englander" and plans for a de facto amnesty are another example of the British government "making commitments and then just tearing them up".



Mr Adams said he doesn't think about his political legacy. After more than 50 years in the cockpit of Irish republicanism, half of that period covering the conflict, he singles out being part of [Féile an Phobail](#) as a personal achievement.

The transformation from that "awful period of our history" to the "exuberance, imagination, creativity and magnanimity" witnessed this summer is what makes him proud.

"I don't think in terms of legacy. I won't be around - and who cares?" he says.

He acknowledges that there were "two big achievements" during his time as Sinn Féin president - the first was securing a peace agreement, with which he is quick to stress the contribution of others such as John Hume, David Trimble, Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair.

The second was to "transform what was essentially a physical force movement into a popular, radical, democratically-mandated political party", which in terms of votes, is now the largest political party on the island.

Again, he plays down the significance of his own role: "That's not down to me, there's been a lot of people involved in that."

It's three-and-a-half years since the former West Belfast MP stepped down as Sinn Féin president to enable a "generational transfer of the leadership" planned with the late Martin McGuinness.

"I haven't stepped back from activism or from political struggle, just the most public aspects of it," he says.



At 72, he rules out standing again for political office and says he no longer has a "desire to be in public life". His duty to his successor Mary Lou McDonald and her deputy Michelle O'Neill is to be "supportive".

"I just don't want to be in the way," he says, adding that he still chairs a number of Sinn Féin committees.

"I'm as busy as I ever was but it's a different type of busyness because I don't have the responsibility, and I don't have to be across everything. I can focus on the couple of things I do for the party, and that actually is a bit liberating."

The additional free time created by his retreat from frontline politics, coupled with restrictions imposed due to Covid, has allowed the republican figurehead to complete a book of short stories, an idea first hatched six years ago.

Black Mountain, published by O'Brien Press, is a collection of fictitious writings, or what Mr Adams terms "stories that happen in my imagination".

Where previously he wrote "in the back of car, on a train or on a plane", his recent project came to fruition mostly "in a little shed" in the yard at the back of the west Belfast home he shares with Colette, his wife of 50 years.

He regards short story writing as a "hobby" that he finds "therapeutic", a change from the usual "polemic" of his political musings.

"I'm generally speaking to and working with other people for an awful lot of my time, then you've family and so on... and I believe I'm a team player, I believe in the collective, I believe in the community," he says.

"But when you write something like this then you need solitude - and I like that."

He clearly enjoys the creative process and speaks of his respect for "people who can live out of their imagination".

"We in Ireland have a strong tradition of storytelling. We are surrounded by fable, history, myths and legends," he says.

While ostensibly fiction, the stories in *Black Mountain* are a mix of lived experience, borrowed anecdotes and the spoils of author's imagination.

'Up for the Match', for example, is an entirely fictional tale, while the 'Mountains of Mourne' is based on the former Sinn Féin leader's recollections of Christmas 1969 when he worked for Cantrell & Cochrane delivering "mostly hard liquor" with a colleague from Belfast's Shankill.

Focussing almost exclusively on the lives of working class people, the prose is folksy, but also displays a humanity and tenderness that few, especially his political adversaries, would likely associate with the republican leader. Although not consciously, many of the lead characters are female.

"It's a celebration of those I admire, working people doing their best to meet life's challenges," he says.

"I didn't realise until I'd finished but there are a lot of women in it, though that's probably based on my experience of activism, in which women have always played a central role."

It also features a lot of death, he says, suggesting it may have to do with his time of life.



Mr Adams talks of the "wonderfully privileged position of still being alive" and of missing Martin McGuinness and Bobby Storey, the former's absence most noticeable "at all-Ireland time... when the Sunday Game is on".

"One of the things about being shot (by the UFF in 1984) was that it made me think about the value of the ordinary things in life, whether it's potting geraniums, the light shining on the mountain or a child doing acrobatics," he says wistfully.

"I believe that the most important thing in life is friendship and that the best thing you can give to a person is time."

Being shot didn't change him politically - there was "no road to Damascus conversion" - but again when he reflects on the number of friends he's lost, the former Sinn Féin president stresses how "very, very lucky" he's been.

He also attributes his life "on the edge", as one of the leaders of "probably the best known struggle in Europe" and someone who's still under threat from dissident republicans, to his tendency to "live in the moment".

His self-professed groundedness he puts down to "staying close to my wife and clan, and the community from which I come".

"The people who know me, know me and sin é," he says.

While the launch of his book is the basis for speaking with the former West Belfast MP, politics inevitably encroaches into the conversation.

On the British government's recently-revealed plan to introduce a statute of limitations for Troubles offences, he says he is "not in the least bit surprised", pointing to a history of overseas counter insurgency tactics in Kenya, Aden, Palestine and the north, that involved "shoot to kill, the running of agents and collusion".

"They are not going to allow a situation where they would be expected to ask their troops to go and do something now, an undercover British soldier doing dirty stuff somewhere - they have to protect him," he says.

The former Sinn Féin leader describes the plans for a de facto amnesty are another example of the British government "making commitments and then just tearing them up".

He points out that even Ian Paisley observed "when Sinn Féin make a commitment, Sinn Féin keep a commitment".

Of the accompanying proposal for a truth recovery process, he says he has been "very clear about this in the past" that a "commission of sorts" was necessary for dealing with legacy.

"I would play my part in bringing forward whatever support I could for that and making whatever contribution I could make to that," he says, noting that victims and survivors seek different things from the process but "essentially what people want is to make sense of what happened".

On a related point, there's no deviation from Mr Adams's long-held assertion that he was never in the IRA, the reasons for which have been "rehearsed a million times", so there's no desire "to go over it again".



When it comes to Sinn Féin's raison d'etre and efforts to secure Irish unity, Mr Adams stresses the need for a border poll to be preceded by a "process of consultation, of planning, of inclusivity" which he believes the Irish government should take the lead on.

He says Sinn Féin wants to see a citizens' assembly and constitutional convention that "has to happen nationally", alongside an examination of the cost of unity and the potential for an island-wide health service.

"We have the National Health Service here which is under huge pressure, we have a semi-privatised service in the south - could we actually get an all-island public health service?" he asks.

"We say yes, and we can afford it."

He argues that there's resistance to a referendum from the current Dublin administration because it would signal the "death knell for the cosy politics, of the golden circle politics that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have dominated since the state was established".

Mr Adams says the British government, likewise, doesn't want a border poll.

When quizzed on the need to persuade unionists about the merits of unity, he references former DUP leader Arlene Foster's claim that she'd leave in the event of a united Ireland.

"As she said herself, she lives in a county that has a majority of nationalists and she's very happy there, it's her homeland. I don't want her to leave, she has a contribution to make," he says.

"But those unionists that are of that type of mindset need to be persuaded that they'll have their representation, that they will have a better involvement."



The former Sinn Féin leader argues that the Irish diaspora, especially in the US, and the European Union also have a role to play in bringing about the circumstances under which a referendum can take place – and ultimately won.

When it's suggested that there won't be a border poll for at least five years, Mr Adams says he doesn't accept that.

"If the Irish government decided now, as a matter of policy, that it was going to go for a referendum, then the timing of a referendum would also be part of that process and the timing should be set by the process of planning and consultation that's put in place," he says.

He suggests "we're plucking figures out of the air" before implying that the planning process through to concurrent referendums on both sides of the border could take as little as three years but that the project of building a new Ireland will take longer.

"How long does it take? It'll be an ongoing process. It'll have to go through transition," he says.

"If you look back at the past 40 years, which is nothing in terms of history, the process of the referendum will just open up other processes and it will be an ongoing transition to a new Ireland."

He speaks of Sinn Féin needing a "partner within unionism", and cites Sir Jeffrey Donaldson's one-time opposition to the Good Friday Agreement before observing "yet now he's back in there".

"But the future is the future, he needs to knuckle down and deal with Michelle and Mary Lou and fulfil his obligations," he says.

"We're not going back, we're going forward as a people and the Donaldsons are probably in Ireland as long as the Adamses - we're both from Planter stock and if he is to be the leader, he needs to be leading."

Mr Adams points to instances where civic unionism has begun to countenance the possibility of constitutional change but notably appears to reject the notion that the current leader of political unionism must engage in a similar manner.

"I wouldn't expect him (Sir Jeffrey Donaldson) to deal necessarily with a united Ireland but the future of Ireland - what is the future?"

"So he is committed to the Good Friday Agreement, he says, he's committed to the all-Ireland infrastructure, east-west arrangements, and he must know it makes sense to have those harmonious, synchronised cross-border initiatives and agencies - he knows all that. All unionism can do is delay."

Mr Adams claims there is a "lot of play acting" within unionism and he points to the ill-fated deal in February 2018 to restore Stormont that included Irish language legislation.

He says future DUP leader Edwin Poots played a "very positive role in it" only to later present himself as being opposed to an *Acht na Gaeilge*.

"What's best for unionists is a harmonious future with everybody else on the island and republicans then need to respond to positivity coming from unionists who are prepared to deal properly with issues like equality and rights and the rest," he says.

The Sinn Féin leader even agrees that potentially contentious issues like the flag and anthem of a future unified state should be on the table.

"Nothing should be not up for discussion," he says.

"One of the things that we learnt was the primacy of dialogue."

Ultimately, he says, it will up to the electorate.

"You know who'll have the say in the end? The people, not a political party, because all of these matters, whatever the conclusion is, will be decided by the people."

Black Mountain and Other Stories is published by O'Brien Press and available [here](#).