AM: Few political lives divide opinion like Gerry Adams. For some he's a man of blood who defended many IRA atrocities during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, to others, a courageous peacemaker who was instrumental in the Good Friday Agreement 20 years ago. After 35 years as President of Sinn Fein, Mr Adams is standing down this month and handing over to a new generation of Republican leaders. I sat down with him last week in Dundalk, near the Irish border, to reflect on his life campaigning for a united Ireland. I began by asking him whether he had failed in that endeavour.

GA: No, because when – when I joined Sinn Fein, which is over 50 years ago, it was banned, it was outlawed. There was no prospect really of a strategy for Irish unity. If I look back now half a million people vote for Sinn Fein. We’re the second largest party in the North. There’s now a peaceful way to get Irish unity.

AM: Your old comrade, Martin McGuinness never saw it. Do you think you’ll see it?

GA: Yes, if I live long enough and you know what, Martin’s passing I suppose proves to all of us that you can’t be certain about anything. You know Martin – I miss Martin every single day. So is an Irish Republic, is Irish unity inevitable? No, it isn’t. It’s only going to happen if we work at it. I come from a very, very straightforward position. I want to see an end to the British connection with Ireland.

AM: How much does the Brexit vote help your ideal of a united Ireland?
GA: I think we need to be very, very careful that we don’t see Brexit as something which can be exploited. Brexit is disastrous for the people of Ireland. The British government are not at all clear about what their future relationship with the European Union’s going to be and they are arguing that they’re going to leave the customs union and they are going to leave the single market. And that will end up a complete disaster for people here on the island of Ireland. The agreement that was made recently which moved the negotiations into their second phase was a fudge. It’s filled with contradictions.

AM: Fudge is not always bad.

GA: Well, and it’s not always bad if it gets you over a particular difficulty. Tons of business people are totally dependent on the flow back and forth of business and commerce across what is an invisible border. When a hard economic border comes back that’s going to stump that, it’s going to destroy that.

AM: If it comes back. If it comes back. One of your own MPs, Mr Hazzard has said that if it comes back those customs posts and those hard pieces of infrastructure along the border could become a target for dissident Republican groups and mass civil disobedience and we could see the return of violence around the border. Do you share that worry?

GA: Yes, I would – he didn’t say it was likely. He said it was concern and that one – one has to be concerned that this would be exploited. But look, you see, people have got used after decades of conflict, people have got used to peace. So the images which you may have or which I may have of border checkpoints and of heavy patrols and all of that -

AM: They belong to history.

GA: That all belongs to history. And nobody wants that back.

AM: Now these debates are going to be thrashed out on the floor of the House of Commons and there are going to be some very
substantial votes. If Sinn Fein took up its seats and even voted once or twice you could change the course of British history and change the course of history for the whole island of Ireland, is it really worth Republican principle not taking those seats and not engaging in those votes?

GA: Well before I deal with that let me tell you the solution to this problem. The solution to this problem is special designated status for the North within the European Union and that is doable –

AM: But the Irish government don’t like this idea and nor do they like it in Brussels. They think it sets too many precedents for the rest of the EU.

GA: Well I don’t know whether they like it or not because they’re very flexible in terms of how they deal with the European Union and its relationships with the various different states and with political will, that is very, very, very doable. Now coming back to the issue of Sinn Finn taking our seats at Westminster, we just received the largest vote that we ever received.

AM: And you have leverage.

GA: No, sorry, sorry, Andrew. We when we get a mandate obey that mandate and stay true to that mandate. What that vote was a vote for no British involvement in our affairs. The centre of political gravity being on the island of Ireland, so we will not betray those people who had a choice.

AM: Let’s talk if we may now about the past. Why did you not join the IRA?

GA: Because I was active in Sinn Fein when the IRA was just non-existent in the 1960s. After the border campaign the whole trajectory within Republicanism was to build politically and I’m – I’m one of the very small group of people who were activists
before the pogroms in 1969. I’m one of the very few Republicans in there. Now, now having said that and you know it’s a matter of history, the IRA has gone, Andrew. The IRA has gone and my position has been consistent that I was not a member of the IRA, but I’ve never distanced myself from the IRA.

AM: So that’s – were you never tempted to join?

GA: No, no I wasn’t, no. I have my role in the struggle, I like to think that I’ve served the struggle well.

AM: Because I mean you know, you always supported the armed struggle, you always defended the IRA. You were treated by members of the IRA as a kind of commander when you were in Long Kesh and everybody who studied you, I mean I range from British politicians to journalists, they all think you were in the IRA. You always say ‘no I wasn’t and I wasn’t on the army council’. Why is that everybody else, including the people who left their testimony in Boston and so forth, are sure that you were?

GA: You’d have to ask them that, Andrew and you know, someday I’ll do an interview and this issue won’t arise. Now I don’t mind dealing with the issue but I make the point again. See the IRA have gone. I did defend the IRA. But I also was very critical of the IRA at times. I don’t condone everything the IRA did.

AM: You were very, very vociferous and very clear in condemning the Manchester Arena bombing by an Islamic group. What is the moral difference between that for instance and the Birmingham pub bombs?

GA: Well Birmingham pub bombs were wrong. I condemn that as well, I don’t have any compunction about that.
AM: But those again, those were innocent people going in just to have a pint of mild and listen to a jukebox.

GA: No, no, but I’ll give you my answer to that. I mean I – I would wish that no one, no one had been killed or injured in the course of the conflict.

AM: At some point you changed your mind about the physical force process and about the use of violence. When and why did you change your mind?

GA: Because we were able to create an alternative. When you can put forward an alternative, sensible people will embrace that alternative because no one wants to be either supporting or part – no one sensible, wants to be supporting or part of armed action. So once you can present an alternative. It’s when you close down the options. When you say to people –

AM: So it was tactical rather than moral? It wasn’t you saying this is morally wrong. Killing people like this is the wrong thing to do morally, it no longer works is what you’re saying in a sense?

GA: No, no, sorry Andrew, I’m better able to tell you what I think on these matters than you to put words into my mouth. If we want to talk about morality you’d need a longer show than this. But look – you can only make moral judgements about people when you walk in their shoes. And that’s – that’s thankfully is we’re talking here about history. We’re talking about something that has passed.

AM: So there was not a moment when you looked at the death of Tim Parry or of some kid or whatever

GA: Of course, of course.

AM: and you thought this has gone far enough. I can no longer stick by this?

GA: Of course we did, of course and I said that at the time.
AM: And there was a moral revulsion.
GA: And I said that at the time. How could anyone, even if it’s accidental, how could anyone stand over the killing of a child or stand over the killing of a civilian? What’s a different matter entirely if you want to be into all of that, if it’s soldiers versing soldiers, but the awfulness of and the horror of war you cannot stand over some of those incidents.

AM: You spent a lot of time sitting on the other side of the table from a whole stream of British leaders. Very very early days Ted Heath and Willie Whitelaw and so forth and then John Major, Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson, Mo Mowlam. Can I ask you as the person sitting on the other side of the table which of those did most for peace in Ireland in your view?

GA: Well I suppose Tony Blair, you know and I would have big issues with him around Iraq and other models and we actually myself and Martin warned him about not getting involved in Iraq.
AM: Did you?
GA: Oh yes, yes, we said to him, don’t – don’t do – look at the Irish experience. Don’t go in there. But he – he was given an opportunity if you like on a plate and he seized it.

AM: So Tony Blair and now Tony Blair’s party is led by a very, very different man who’s always supported a united Ireland, he’s been a big backer of yours over the years. What difference would it make to the island of Ireland and to Sinn Fein and your cause to have Jeremy Corbyn as British prime minister, which he might well be?

GA: Well I would like to see Jeremy in that position for the benefit of people in Britain, leaving Ireland out of it. I think Jeremy is an outstanding politician and I hope -
AM; Well let’s put Ireland back into it though.
GA: I hope my endorsement of him isn't used against him in the time ahead. But yes, he and Ken Livingstone and others kept faith and they were the people who said when others said no, talk. They were the people who were open to conversation about how to deal with conflict and how to get conflict resolution processes. But look, let's not pre-empt the next General Election.

AM: Of course not.

AM: Gerry Adams, are you a man of faith?

GA: Yes, I am, yes.

AM: So one day you will be judged by your maker and when you're being judged by your maker will you be able to say I have clean hands?

GA: Well, the one thing that I understand about faith – and you know, as you get older you reflect on all of these – the one thing I know about Jesus is that he forgave. He didn't go round condemning. Treat people with dignity and people will respond in a dignified way. Treat people badly and people will respond badly.

AM: Nobody gets to write their own obituary, but what would be the headline on yours?

GA: Oh god knows. I'm not really interested. You know some people say to me what's your legacy – like I say, I won't be around, you know.

AM: None of us will. Gerry Adams thank you very much indeed for talking to us.

GA: Thanks Andrew.