



## **Presidents Address – 2021 AGM**

**29<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

I would like to welcome all the Delegates to this year's online AGM 2021. Sadly, we are not all together in person for what would have been ordinarily our Spring Gathering. This past year 2020 has been enormously challenging for all of us and for many we have not been able to partake of the activities we love. As I write this we remain without a clear picture of when we will be able to return to the mountains, craigs and walls. But we remain optimistic and continue to support the guidance and direction from Public Health Officials and Governments. The current global pandemic and financial challenges has affected all sectors, but thankfully during 2020, as a National Governing Body, Mountaineering Ireland made prudent steps to address all major challenges they faced.

Over the past year, our staff team have continued to work hard to deliver a range of member services including an extraordinarily successful Zooming Round the Mountains program, a well-attended Climbing Wall Seminar and are currently delivering the Club Re-Boot Series. I would like to add a particular note of thanks to everyone who has renewed their membership to date, and thus supported our work. The past year has also seen the successful launch of "Irish Peaks" which is already in its 3<sup>rd</sup> print run. This book is a superb memorial to the late Joss Lynam who inspired so many people to explore and value Irelands Mountains. I would like to convey a special note of thanks to Margaret and Alan Tees, the project team leaders, whom without their direction this would not have been possible. Our office in Irish Sport HQ remains closed to us and our staff team continue to work remotely, as they have done so since March 2020. I would ask for your continued patience as some membership services may take a little longer to complete in this challenging environment.

If you are lucky enough to live near an upland area or have visited many of the social media forums you will have been struck by the sheer numbers of people who have found joy in walking in our wild places over the past year. Whilst this has not been without challenge, both in terms of environmental impact and some pressure on our Volunteer Mountain rescues teams there is a lot to celebrate in this. Whilst the motivation to explore new places by these new faces to our community seems at first different, the obsession with Instagram type photo opportunities, finding secret waterfalls and mountain lakes to swim in, I would suggest on deeper observation it may not be all that different. Much of this is driven by factors we would all recognise, the desire to escape the city, the everyday, a feeling of the need for isolation or good company. A sense of adventure and exploring new places. Many of these new faces are young and that is a good thing for the health of our sport. Social Media is a funny thing, you see people with no understanding of navigation or maps asking online for advice on where to start to get to a mountain. But is that really that different to when we asked some other walkers or climbers for the best place to start or beta on the new climbing route? Perhaps the basic desire is the same and it's just how we communicate that has changed.

One thing that is obvious is that there is a tremendous skills gap, both in terms of environmental awareness of the fragility of our upland environment and the ability to look after yourself safely in the mountains. The sheer numbers make this seem worrying and it is indeed a challenge for Mountaineering Ireland. Whilst we will continue to provide high level support to all our members we also need to look to the future and consider what this surge means. Some of it will pass as Covid restrictions ease and people can return to other sports and indoor gyms, but many will have found a longer lasting love for the mountains. We have seen similar growth in climbing over the last decade, large scale growth in climbing walls is evident but our annual climbing meets also demonstrate increased growth and popularity outdoors as well. There is increasing pressures from access to the outdoors to insurance for climbing walls and award providers. It is imperative as an NGB and as a Community we all reach out and welcome everyone. For without engagement, we can neither engage with nor fully represent the community. We will shortly be launching a new individual membership drive to engage with the new walkers and climbers who conservatively number over 150,000.

I want to thank Murrough and the staff team for their continued work throughout a challenging year to support our membership and look ahead. Much of this work goes unseen, from the background work in this AGM to continued work to ensure we all have access to the places we love. But it makes a tremendous difference to all that we do.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to all the volunteers who make this all possible from club committees to our Subgroups and the Board. I want to thank my current and outgoing Board members, but in particular I would like to thank our outgoing Chair Paul Barron and Chair of MTBI Dawson Stelfox. Paul has given nine years of service to the Board and the past five as Chair. His steady stewardship has been of great benefit to the Board and ultimately the entire membership. Dawson continues to serve on our Mountain Training Board but has supported Mountaineering Ireland for many years, from serving on Boards and Subcommittees to introducing others, as a Mountain Guide he is part of our DNA.

Can I wish you all a happy and safe year ahead and I look forward to meeting many of you in the hills and hopefully we can have next year's AGM and Spring Gathering together in one of our wonderful mountain ranges.

**Paul Kellagher**

**President Mountaineering Ireland**