



PRESENTATION BY JOSEPH MCMANUS - PRESIDENT

On behalf of
UNITED IRISH COUNTIES ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK

**A Theachtaí Dála, a Sheanadóirí, a dhaoine uaisle,
Deputies, Senators, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

History

County organizations have been an integral part of Irish immigrant life in New York for over one hundred and fifty years. The early societies were for the most part purely social organizations but in the 1870s some of them started to offer benefits for sickness and death. In the 1880s, inspired by the land reform movement in Ireland many additional county societies were organized. Eviction and high rents in Ireland were fought on a local basis and the New York county societies were fashioned in a similar manner.

Local people working together to find solutions to local problems made the county societies, rather than one of the Irish fraternal or social organizations, better equipped to respond to sudden developments in either the new or the old country. In the early 1890s the first attempt was made to establish a central body to coordinate the Irish counties. A central organization for county societies was set up in Manhattan and at the same time a similar coordinating body was established in Brooklyn. Both these overseeing bodies were similar in design to the present day United Irish Counties. Although the county societies prospered, the two governing bodies faded away after a few years.

In the early years of the twentieth century another attempt was made to create a governing body and from that time the United Irish Counties Association (UICA) has been at the forefront of Irish cultural and social life in the Big Apple. In the 1980s, during the last major downturn in the Irish economy, we witnessed a new wave of immigration to the United States. These 'New Irish' as they became known were undocumented and faced far different problems than their predecessors. Responding to their needs a new organization called the Irish Immigration Reform Movement (IIRM) was founded at a meeting of the County Cork Association in May 1987. The UICA immediately offered its assistance by putting its offices at the disposal of the IIRM. As many of you know, the efforts of the IIRM resulted in the passage of the Immigration Act of 1990 giving 48,000 visas to the Irish. These visas became known as the 'Morrison Visas' named after Congressman Bruce Morrison of Connecticut. Today, I am firmly of the opinion that the services, organization and good will of the UICA, and like minded organizations, will again be called upon to assist yet another wave of Irish immigrants, and to help them navigate even more perilous pathways to a safer and more certain future. There is already ample evidence of this.

To give you a sense of both the obstacles, and the opportunities, for Irish immigrants, I would like to address some of the commonly-held myths relating to U.S. immigration.

Myth:

The post 9/11 anti-immigrant backlash did not affect Irish immigrants as much as other immigrants.

Fact:

All immigrants, regardless of their country of origin, have felt some of the negative affects of the anti-immigrant sentiment since 9/11.

However, this has not been the effect of new laws, but rather an increase in enforcement of existing laws from 1996, the last time there was a comprehensive change in immigration legislation.

These measures include an increase in detection and deportation; enforcement of bars for immigrants who overstay their visas; and refusal of drivers' licenses to undocumented immigrants.

Myth: If an Irish immigrant is caught and detained, they can offer to purchase a flight home immediately.





Fact: There are an increasing number of Irish nationals who are being detained and deported, after being held in detention from anywhere between 2-6 weeks, with no right to bail or to a judicial hearing.

Myth: You can enter the United States from Canada undetected.

Fact: There is a significant increase in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”) personnel within 100 miles of the border. Most importantly, immigrants who have been deported and return to the U.S. face five years’ imprisonment for re-entry without inspection.

Myth: There are still ways for people who have overstayed their visas to travel in and out of the U.S.

Fact: With increased efficiency, the introduction of machine readable passports, biometrics and the introduction of the ESTA and USVISIT electronic systems, this is not a real possibility, and the penalties for providing fraudulent information can be severe.

Myth: There are no visas available to Irish people who want to travel to the U.S.

Fact: There are still plenty of options for Irish nationals who wish to emigrate to the U.S., either permanently, or temporarily for work or training, such as:

- The Diversity Visa lottery (which runs from October to November)
- The 20,000 Irish Work Training J-1 visas for graduates and students
- H-1B for intending emigrants who have a college degree
- Visas for artists and athletes
- Investor visas
- Family sponsorship (U.S. citizen spouse, children, parents, siblings)
- Employer green card sponsorship.

Myth: It is impossible to get good information about what visa options are available.

Fact: There are many great resources available to intending emigrants both here and in the U.S, including the Emigrant Advice Center in Dublin, and the various Irish Immigration Centers throughout the U.S. They can provide assistance with employment, accommodation, visas and social services.

Other organizations, such as Fáilte 32, help long-term visa holders find employment. Failte 32 was organized in May 2010 by Paul Hurley (Dublin), Owner of O’Casey’s Restaurant and Irish Pub and President of the United Restaurant and Tavern Owners Assoc., Paddy McCarthy (Cork), Founder and President of the Irish Examiner USA, and Maurice Landers (Limerick), President of the Limerick Association - New York. They were supported by myself, present on the day of the launch and acting in the capacity of President of the United Irish Counties Association of New York, and the then Consul General, the Hon. Niall Burgess, along with representatives of other prominent Irish organizations in New York. Although only a short time in existence, many J-1 visa holders have secured employment through Failte 32, and benefited from the facilities and support provided by its affiliated organizations.

Myth: There is bound to be an amnesty soon. President Obama has made an election promise on this.

Fact: Senator Schumer has presented a bill which has failed to get the support it needs to pass without more Republican sponsors, and chances are that the Democrats will lose the House and weaken their Senate majority, making passage of comprehensive immigration reform more tenuous.





Myth: Irish immigrants in the U.S. are doing really well.

Fact: While many Irish immigrants are doing well there also those who, for a variety of reasons, are not making it.

Many Irish people have difficulty negotiating the complex system in the U.S.

Undocumented immigrants especially are often afraid to seek assistance for problems such as:

- Substance abuse
- Domestic violence
- Mental illness/depression
- Homelessness
- Arrests/convictions/immigration problems
- Serious health problems and disability
- Death of a family member
- Divorce or separation
- Child abuse/neglect.

IMMIGRATION NUMBERS, PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE

As you are all no doubt aware, the Economic and Social Research Institute in its April 2010 report, *Recovery Scenarios for Ireland*, warned that 200,000 people may be forced to emigrate between now and 2015 if unemployment is not addressed.

Assuming no speedy recovery in growth, this might even be an underestimation.

We have no way of knowing how many of those projected numbers might emigrate to the United States, and other external factors, such as the state of the U.S. job market, and immigration enforcement, will attract or repel immigrants to the U.S., but if history is anything to go by, we will be dealing with tens of thousands of new Irish arrivals over the next few years.

So how many Irish nationals have managed to navigate the system successfully to date?

(1) Irish nationals who have been granted green cards

According to the 2009 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, published by the Department of Homeland Security, in the 1840s, there were 656,145 Irish nationals granted legal permanent resident (green card) status. In the 1990s, largely due to the success of the Morrison visas, there were 65,384.

In the last decade, from 2000 to 2009, green cards distributed to Irish nationals totaled 29,282.

Last year, for example, only 1,708 Irish immigrants could wave brand new green cards.

This compares to the combined total for Norway and Sweden (not high-migration countries, you would have thought) who polled 1,726 green cards between them.

When you also compare that to the estimated tens of thousands of Irish living in the shadows, undocumented, with no health insurance, no access to welfare assistance, no drivers' licenses, no credit facilities, no real identities and no way home (or if they come home, no way back), you can understand the scale of the problem.

Worse, you can see how those numbers can easily multiply.

What we need to ensure is that the undocumented problem does not become a critical mass and lead to a crisis. We need to make sure, insofar as we can, that when our young people make the decision to try their luck abroad, they do not rush headlong into the immigration trap that has ensnared so many of their older brothers, sisters and cousins.

(2) Deportations

Of those who found themselves in the clutches of immigration enforcement, some 119 Irish nationals were deported in 2009, or almost 7% of the number who were granted green cards in 2009.

Or, to put it in another perspective, there were over twice as many Irish deported as there were Diversity Visa Lottery winners in 2009 (there were 51 winners from Ireland).





These statistics are destined to get much worse.

Many of you have dealt with frantic phone calls from parents or relatives of people who entered on their Irish passports, and who have been arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, asking you for help to get their children legal advice or release from detention.

And once you make the calls through the channels of the Department of Foreign Affairs, and immigration centers, and immigration lawyers and Congressional friends, you come to the depressing conclusion that there is nothing anyone can do.

Any Irish national who enters on the Visa Waiver Program has waived his or her right to legal counsel, to an immigration court, to a bond hearing, or to challenge how long they will remain in detention.

If immigration enforcement continues to sharpen its teeth, there will be a lot more calls, and a lot more anguish to come.

(3) Temporary work visas

The comparable statistics for temporary non-immigrants, on work visas, training visas, musicians' visas etc. came to just under 25,000 in 2009 alone (and you'll be glad to know that around 1,822 visas were granted for Irish diplomats).

There were 561,000 Irish nationals who came on a short visit to the United States.

Some of them stayed, how many we cannot be sure, but we can be sure that they are stuck in a bind and have fallen outside the system.

The tragedy is that the government had successfully negotiated the Irish Work and Travel Program, which can give 20,000 Irish students the benefit of a one-year work visa, without the need to have an employer up front, so they can search for a job when they get there.

Only [number] of these visas have been taken up.

Besides poor marketing, we believe that these visas are too narrowly tailored to students (many of whom have other means to get temporary visas) and exclude potential immigrants from the construction and service industries, or people with advanced skills, but who have been out of university for too long.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Inevitably, you will want to know what you can do to alleviate hardships for those currently in undocumented status, and to prevent another swell of undocumented immigrants. There are a number of initiatives we would call on you to support.

- (1) Broaden the reach and scope of the IWT J-1 visa;
- (2) Keep up the financial support for the immigration centers, who provide sterling professional advice to thousands of Irish immigrants, and who have been in the trenches for many years, through good times and bad;
- (3) Support the DREAM act;
- (4) Continue to lobby your friends in Congress for comprehensive immigration reform. Realise, by doing so, you are not butting into another country's internal affairs – you are simply asking for our young to experience and benefit from the open traditions of a country that Irish nationals helped build from revolutionary times to the present. In light of the contribution that Irish men and women have made to the United States, in public and military service down through the years, we are not asking for much in return.

I would like, in conclusion, to record a sincere 'go raibh míle maith agaibh' to all TDs and Senators who have actively campaigned on the issue of the undocumented Irish in the United States. Some of you have visited the U.S. to address this issue specifically. Your efforts and continuing interest are much appreciated, not only by the Irish diaspora in the United States but by their parents and families here at home.

I urge the relaunch of your campaigning and the reforging of focused working links with all the interested Irish and immigrant organisations in the United States. Ní neart go cur le chéile.

Go raibh maith agaibh arís.

