

Testimony of
Mr. Niall O'Dowd

July 12, 2006

TESTIMONY OF
NIALL O'DOWD
FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN
IRISH LOBBY FOR IMMIGRATION
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
UNITED STATES SENATE

"EXAMINING THE NEED FOR
COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM, PART II"

WEDNESDAY, JULY 12, 2006
DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING ROOM 226
9:30 A.M.

My name is Niall O'Dowd I am Founder and Chairman of the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform and also founder and Publisher of Irish Voice Newspaper and Irish America Magazine the two largest Irish American publications.

I am a native of Ireland, once undocumented, but now a proud American citizen.

I have lived the emigrant dream in America since coming here in 1979. I started a newspaper with less than \$1,000 dollars in 1979 in California and made a success of it. Currently, I employ 22 people in New York City running both of my companies.

But I come here representing the 50,000 Irish undocumented in the United States and the millions of Irish Americans who are looking for a resolution to this issue.

Since the inception of the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform last December we have held scores of public meetings across the United States attended by thousands and have held two lobbying days in Washington D.C. A total of over 5,000 Irish Americans from across the United States attended both lobbying days.

The facts are clear to us. Without immigration reform the Irish-born community in the United States will no longer exist and one of the greatest contributors to the success of this nation will be no more.

Our neighborhoods are disappearing, our community organizations are in steep decline. Our sporting and cultural organizations are deeply affected by the lack of emigration.

Meanwhile, our undocumented community is under siege. They can no longer travel to Ireland, even when family tragedies occur.

Their drivers licenses will not be renewed which means mothers can not drive their children to school. The day to day struggle of living illegally in America has taken a heavy personal toll on them. I submit that they deserve better.

Everything they have worked years for in America, building their own American dream is now falling around them and I submit that America will be the big loser.

I know that hundreds of these emigrants, Irish construction workers, worked with little more than their bare hands to try to uncover bodies at Ground Zero after 9/11 .

Irish labor union members and construction crews were among the first on the scene and they tried frantically to save lives working alongside rescuers who included thousands of Irish American fire and police workers.

No one was calling them illegals then.

They did no more than previous Irish generations. As President Bush has stated "Throughout our history America has been greatly blessed by the innumerable contributions of the Irish." Unfortunately the contribution of Irish-born may be about to end.

If the Irish antecedents of Andrew Jackson, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan or indeed, America's greatest dramatist Eugene O'Neill, were trying to enter the United States today they would have to do so illegally.

The sad reality is that there is simply no way for the overwhelming majority of Irish people to come to the United States legally at present.

So when people say to me that the Irish should get in line to come here I tell them there is no line we can join, no way the vast majority of our people can come legally to America.

As a July 10th op-ed article in the Wall Street Journal by 33 leaders of the Conservative movement noted " While immigrants continue to be drawn to the jobs created in this country they have no legal way to enter the country."

The figures for the Irish bear this out, of the almost 1 million green card visas given out last year about 2,000 went to the Irish. Since 1995 in the diversity visa program, which was intended in part to help old seed countries Ireland has been successful in obtaining one half of one per cent or 2,800 out of 553,000.

Such realities, however, have not stopped thousands of Irish doing what generations of Irish have done since they served in George Washington's army - coming to America and living the American dream like generations before them.

Unfortunately, of course, they are undocumented which is why I am here today to tell their story.

I can tell you about Mary who is 36, whose brother was killed in a car crash a few months ago and she had to listen to his funeral down a phone line because she cannot go home and grieve with her family.

Yet she has boundless faith in the goodness of this country and has spent sixteen years making her life here.

She is now a registered nurse, a proud homeowner and intends to marry soon. Hospitals would snap her up in a moment if she became available. She deserves her American dream.

Then there is Brian, who is 32, a contractor, who was among the first to go to Ground Zero because he was working nearby
Brian continues to believe in his American dream. He has six Americans working full time for him, all legally and he looks forward to the day he can take his new wife back to Ireland and meet the families they have not seen for years.

Eamon who is 38, came over from Armagh in Northern Ireland 14 years ago. There were no jobs in his town because of the Troubles and the only recruiting was being done by paramilitaries. Here Eamon now runs his own roofing company and employs six persons legally.

So many others have grandchildren their grandparents have never seen, or live in daily fear of being deported or worse, a family tragedy back in Ireland which could end their lives here.

These are typical stories of the Irish undocumented here in America. They ask for just one thing - the opportunity to live their American dream like so many generations of Irish before them.

My deepest desire, and that of millions of Irish Americans around this great country, is that their wish can be granted. With your help I believe it can.

Thank you very much.