

**Remarks by Ambassador Anderson at the
AOH Biannual Convention in St. Louis, Missouri
Friday, 1st August 2014**

I am delighted to join you here this evening and to extend my greetings to all members of the AOH and Ladies AOH.

I am especially glad that you had the opportunity to hear from Minister Deenihan yesterday morning on his first trip abroad as Minister with responsibility for the Diaspora.

Engagement with the AOH and LAOH has book-ended my first year as Ireland's Ambassador to the United States. After I arrived in Washington at the end of August last, my first public speaking event in my new role was to address your DC Convention in the early days of September.

And now, as I wrap up my first year, my final speaking engagement (before I depart on holidays this weekend), is to address your Convention in St. Louis.

There is a nice symmetry in all of this and it certainly underlines the key place the AOH and the LAOH hold among the Irish community organisations.

But, enjoyable and good as they are, more important than these periodic opportunities to speak to you is the work we do together throughout the year. And certainly I feel we have soldiered together in the trenches during these past 12 months.

Immigration reform has been at the top of my priority list over my first year. This reflects the deeply felt concerns in Ireland, the clear instructions from the Government, and the close and hands-on involvement of the Oireachtas.

It also, however, reflects the background I come from myself. My mother grew up on a small farm in Co. Limerick. Before she died a few years ago, she wrote her memoirs, and described in very moving terms the departure of her oldest brother for America, via Cobh. He spent his life on the building sites here, and his family in Ireland never saw him again.

Life is radically different now; we all use our mobile phones and we call and skype across the globe everyday. But for the undocumented and their families, the pain of separation remains sharp, and real, and sustained.

So our hopes and efforts were hugely invested over the past year. All of us would have dearly loved to be celebrating a successful outcome at our meeting here in St. Louis. But we are still on the journey.

I want to say, loud and clear, how stalwart the AOH and LAOH, have been on that journey. Your National Immigration Director, Dan Dennehy, has been as steady as a rock. The commitment and energy of your branches across America has been unwavering.

This kind of partnership is absolutely essential. When we knock on doors on Capitol Hill, as we do, and when we pursue meeting after meeting with the Administration, as we do, we know that doors are opening to us because of the work the Irish lobby groups are doing at grassroots level. It has to be that kind of two-pronged approach.

As we all know, Ireland is a small country of less than 5 million people. But our voice here is amplified because of the size and the passion of our great diaspora. We stand on your shoulders.

The past 12 months have been a roller-coaster: at times, it seemed immigration reform might be within our grasp, only for prospects to fade as some new obstacle emerged.

Tempered by this experience, all of us are reluctant to make predictions today. Hopes have so often been raised and dashed, and we cannot lightly engage the feelings of the undocumented community.

But I have an underlying optimism. So many commentators suggest that – despite all the setbacks and roadblocks – there has been a significant shift in public sentiment: that the question now is not if there will be immigration reform, but when.

I know that we will continue our journey in lock-step with the AOH and LAOH – that we can count on you and you can count on us.

Apart from immigration reform, this has been a busy and eventful first year. I have tried as much as possible to get outside the DC beltway, and to experience this great country at firsthand. I have had speaking engagements and met the community in almost a dozen cities around the country. Everywhere, I am questioned about the Irish economy and about Northern Ireland.

The news on the economy has overall been very good. Our resilience as a people has prevailed. We are out of the Troika programme, back in growth, our credit ratings restored. And I am happy to report that America has played a huge part in that recovery: foreign investment from the US is doing extraordinarily well, our exports here are up,

tourism from the US – which got such a boost from The Gathering last year – is continuing to grow.

With regard to Northern Ireland, we have come an enormous distance in recent years. Things are incomparably better than they were. But there is unfinished business. We were disappointed that the talks facilitated by Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan did not succeed. The outstanding issues – dealing with the past, parades, flags - need to be addressed in a spirit of courage and compromise, and with a real sense of urgency. It is critically important that the institutions and arrangements established under the Good Friday Agreement are robustly defended. And, as always, the goodwill and positive engagement from this side of the Atlantic is imperative.

Finally, let me mention planning for the centenary of 1916, which of course we will celebrate two years hence in 2016. I know that all of us want it to be a big year in the U.S., given the very special connection. The United States, after all, is the only foreign country mentioned in the 1916 Proclamation, and a number of the signatories had strong ties to the U.S.

Our celebrations should keep faith with the historical reality of 1916. But I hope we will also celebrate the 100-year journey, where we have arrived, and where we are heading. It should be a year of proclaiming Ireland, of pride in Ireland.

And that is the word on which I want to finish: pride. As Ireland's 17th Ambassador to the United States, I feel immensely proud of the country I represent. Of course we haven't got everything right; of course we have issues and challenges still to confront. But, as a country and as a people, we have come so far, achieved so much, contributed so much.

And I know all of you, in the AOH and LAOH, feel the same sense of legitimate pride in your organisations. You too have endured, you have achieved, you have contributed.

On Irish night at your Convention, let us celebrate that sense of shared pride. And let us resolve to go forward, safeguarding all that is good, but also ready to embrace change, rising to the 21st century challenges of equality and inclusivity.

I wish you all the best in your work, and I hope we will continue to move forward together.

Go raith mile maith agaibh. Thank you all very much.