

***America the Beautiful***

**Remarks by Ambassador Anne Anderson  
at the Welcome Reception for Democratic Spouses and Guests  
30 April 2014**

It is a great honour for me to join you this evening to speak with such an audience on such a theme.

Although I am less than a year in my current post as Irish Ambassador in DC, it is my ninth year to live in the United States. Throughout those years, the physical beauty of America has always enraptured me – the scale, the grandeur, the awe-inspiring vistas.

But it is a different and deeper sort of beauty I want to speak about this evening – what it is that represents the soul of America.

As it happens, today is a day when my head is full of these thoughts. And let me tell you why.

During this past week, I had two experiences that left a deep impression on me. This day last week, I was in Dublin accompanying a US delegation – a Faith and Politics delegation – led by Congressman John Lewis of Atlanta. Yesterday, I was at Quinnipiac University, in Connecticut, opening an exhibition at their Great Hunger Institute relating to the devastating Irish Famine of the 1840s.

I want to take a moment to tell you something about these experiences - how they resonate and how they thread together.

Congressman Lewis is of course an iconic figure in the American civil rights movement. As well as being a leader and activist, he has written beautifully and eloquently about the movement and its lessons and legacy.

In welcoming the Congressman to Dublin, our Foreign Minister quoted from “Walking with the Wind” – John’s memoir of the movement. Here is that quotation:

“Children holding hands. Walking with the wind. That is America to me – not just the movement for civil rights but the endless struggle to respond with decency, dignity and a sense of brotherhood to all the challenges that face us as a nation, as a whole.”

As we consider John’s words, let me say something about yesterday’s experience in the Great Hunger Museum.

Any of you with Irish ancestry, or with an interest in Irish history will know something of the Great Famine that ravaged our country in the 1840s. Out of our population of eight million at the time, one million died and two million emigrated – almost all of them to America.

Our people came in conditions of utter devastation. The choice, for those who had a choice, was an existential one: starve to death in Ireland or grasp at the chance at survival in America.

And so our people came. And they didn’t just survive here – they gave heart and soul to help build this country that had given them shelter.

They built the physical infrastructure – the railroads, the canals, the skyscrapers. They built the communities - as teachers, police, fire fighters, union leaders. And, as the roll call of Irish names in Congress attests, they found their place in the political institutions of this country.

Today, reflecting on the theme of *America the Beautiful*, these two experiences of the past week intertwine for me. John Lewis’ call for decency, dignity, brotherhood. And yesterday’s reminder of how America opened its arms to the Irish at their time of need, and how the Irish have never stopped giving back.

I am left with many thoughts and emotions. But among the clearest is the need for immigration reform - one of the great causes of this Congress – to move forward.

I am conscious of all the dedicated crusaders who are advancing this cause. The voices of many groups, and many ethnicities, are joining together and powerfully reinforcing each other.

The Irish voice is among them. For us, there is a two-fold interest. With an estimated 50,000 undocumented Irish in the U.S., we want to help them find a way out of the shadows. And – given the current near impossibility for Irish people to come and live and work legally in this

country – we ardently hope to see an avenue created for legal immigration from Ireland in the future.

These two great countries of ours are bound by the closest ties: of blood, of toil, of language and culture, and – today – of business. There is such openness in almost every respect. How can it make sense, when it comes to immigration, that your doors should remain largely closed to us?

The economic and business case for immigration is clear. Study after study has demonstrated the increment in entrepreneurialism, in innovation, and the other benefits.

Today's emigrants from Ireland are educated, confident, cosmopolitan - in most ways, almost unrecognisable from the Irish emigrants of the last century. But they share this with the generations who went before: like their forebears, they too want to roll up their sleeves and contribute. The U.S. would be enriched, in every sense, by their presence.

But tonight I am not making the economic case for immigration. It is not an occasion for pocketbook arguments. Tonight's theme is *America the Beautiful*. It is about the fundamental things that have always defined America – dignity, decency, opportunity. It is about the identity and soul of this country.

No one denies the complexity of immigration reform. We know that getting it right is a matter of negotiation and compromise – addressing legitimate concerns, finding appropriate balances.

That can happen – that is the normal business and challenge of legislators.

But the first and most important step is surely to frame the debate in the right way.

I believe that tonight's theme - *America the Beautiful* – establishes the right starting point.

That great patriotic hymn has stood the test of time. It sings of a country of strength and self-control, but also a country of grace and mercy.

That indeed is the enduring America, the beautiful America.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you.

---