

Testimony of Niall O'Dowd
Founder and Chairman of Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform

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Committee on the Judiciary

Subcommittee on Immigration,
Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security
and International Law

Testimony by Niall O'Dowd

Founder and Chairman Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform
to the House Subcommittee on Immigration, Tuesday May 22, 2007

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

The Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform has over 35,000 members nationwide. It is now the largest Irish grouping in America. It was founded in December 2005 to address the issues of 50,000 Irish undocumented in the United States and the future access of Irish citizens to America.

Since the 1965 immigration act, Ireland in common with many other old seed countries has essentially been frozen out of immigration to the United States. In 2005, for instance, only 2,000 out of 1.1 million green cards went to Irish applicants.

As we have pointed out under current legislation, the forbears of President Ronald Reagan or John F. Kennedy could not come to America legally.

The impact since 1965 has been that many Irish come to the United States as tourists and stay on, becoming undocumented.

The lack of access to America now threatens the very existence of the Irish-born communities in the United States. As both the Los Angeles Times and New York Times has reported in the past year, our neighborhoods are crumbling, our community organizations are aging and losing members, and our sporting organizations are in dire trouble because of lack of members.

Without legalizing the Irish here and allowing a future flow of Irish emigration to America I believe we are seeing the inevitable passing of one of the great emigrant streams in American history.

There will always be Irish who want to emigrate legally to America, to build on the extraordinary connections of blood, community and family that have been part and parcel of America's past, present and we hope future.

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.

The Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform has the support of every major Irish organization in the United States and we believe a large percentage of the 40 million Americans

of Irish descent. Our national rally days in Washington D.C have always attracted over 5,000 supporters from all over the U.S. This issue has the highest priority in our community.

We are working closely with other immigrant rights groups on this issue through our membership of CIRNOW and other groups, which are seeking to influence public policy on this issue. We are very grateful to the legislators of both parties in both the House and Senate who have taken on this issue of immigration reform. We understand the complexity and the emotional atmosphere of the issue and we have been deeply encouraged by the willingness of so many legislators to make a determined effort to resolve it.

With regards to the current legislation before the House and Senate we have very specific statements to make.

We strongly approve of the provisions that legalize the undocumented in the Senate bill which we believe is a reasoned and humane approach to bringing these people into the American mainstream.

We particularly note the eligibility cut off date of January of this year and the path to a green card and citizenship, which the bill allows. We believe the House bill should reflect these provisions. We also approve of the merit system for future flows of emigrants which we believe would be advantageous to us and would go some way to address the inequity that intending Irish emigrants currently face. We would like to see a merit visa system introduced as soon as possible to give our community reasonable access to new immigrants. We hope that the House bill would also include this provision. As regards the family preferences we believe the present system is largely unworkable because of the lengthy processing times – i.e., 14 years for siblings of US citizens.

On temporary workers we believe that the notion that they should return home for a year between two year working assignments is completely unworkable and would create a new class of undocumented residents of the US, which is exactly the problem the House, and Senate are trying to fix. We hope the House legislation will deal with this issue in a more humane manner. Overall we believe there are many very positive aspects of both Strive and the Senate bill. As a community we approve of the legalization steps and the merit visa system. We believe much work needs to be done on the other outstanding issues.