

Comhairle Uladh C.L.G.

Chomhdháil Bhliantúil 2009
28ú Feabhra 2009

A Cháirde Gael,

Ar dtús, a dhaoine uaisle, fáilte mhór roimh achan duinne agaibh go dtí Béal Átha Seanaigh inniu, go dtí Chomhdháil Bhliantúil Comhairle Uladh C.L.G. Fearaim fíor chaoin fáilte romhaibh go léir go dtí mo cheanntair agus mo bhaile dúchais féin agus muidne ag ceiliúradh céad bliain saol ag an club áitiúil

‘Aodh Ruadh’ ar an bhaile seo.

Gabhaim mo bhúiochas pearsanta agus búiochas ar son Comhairle Uladh, do gach aon duine agaibh as ucht an obair iontach a rinne sibh ar son Cumann Lúthchleas Gael sa chúige seo i rith na bliana atá díreach thart. Mo bhúiochas speisialta do na hOifigí agus baill an Chomhairle, do na hoibrithe deonacha go léir ar fud na cúige agus don Runaí Dónal O’Murchú agus an fhoireann oibre cúige.

It is my pleasure to welcome you all here today to County Donegal and to my home town and Club Aodh Ruadh, which this year celebrates it’s Centenary.

At the outset I pay tribute to all involved, the Chairman and Officers of Donegal County Board, the Committee under Brian McEniff’s Chairmanship tasked with locating a site and Corporate Donegal and Club Donegal on the recent announcement in relation to the purchase of a site for the development of a Centre of Excellence for the county. This long sought after facility for the preparation of teams and for the facilitation of schools and colleges games will meet a well established need and cannot be brought to fruition soon enough. Combined with the completion of works at McCumhaill Park, Ballybofey in the early part of this year, this should, in the very near future bring to completion the County Board’s own infrastructural programme in Donegal, leaving the way open to

move forward with the other infrastructural needs which have been identified. The recent launch of a Strategy for the development of the GAA in the County, sets out an ambitious framework for the modernisation and development of the GAA here, and Comhairle Uladh was pleased to be closely involved in supporting the strategic planning process.

You have received an extensive Convention booklet for 2009. As well as the usual excellent Report from our Runai Cúige and the various committees of the Council, there is an in-depth presentation of the Coaching and Games Development Programmes and a detailed Operational Report which charts very well the comprehensive range of activities across all facets of the GAA undertaken by this Council during the year.

What stands out in this comprehensive reportage is the dynamic activity of Ulster GAA, and the commitment and dedication of so many people throughout the Province, both staff and voluntary workers, who deliver all of this. 2008 again underscored the continuing strength of Gaelic games in Ulster, crowned with the historic wins by the Tyrone Senior and Minor teams who for the first time in the annals of the GAA in Ulster brought All Ireland Senior and Minor titles to this Province in the same year, and did so in remarkable style. Derry's success in the National Football League, Antrim's achievement in winning the Tommy Murphy Cup, as well as the Walsh Cup in Hurling, Fermanagh's promotion to Division 2 of the National Football League and Armagh's Ulster Senior Championship success after a replay against Fermanagh added considerably to the success of the year. Ulster University Jordanstown's success in the Sigerson Cup, during the Golden Jubilee of Queens University first win in this competition in 1958, brought further honour to the Province which was also complimented by the achievement of All Ireland Senior Schools and Colleges titles by St. Patrick's Academy, Dungannon and St. Malachy's, Castlewellan

Early in 2008 Rock, Tir Eoghain reached the All Ireland Junior Club Championship Final to be defeated by Canovee, and were the only Ulster representatives at that stage of the

club Championship competitions. Once again on St. Patrick's Day this year, Crossmaglen Rangers will carry the Ulster banner in the All Ireland Club Championship semi-final, against Kilmacud Crokes of Dublin and we wish them the very best. Commiserations to Ruairi Óg, Cushendall who last weekend were edged out of a place in the All Ireland Club Hurling Final in an enthralling encounter with De La Salle, Waterford.

All nine Ulster Counties, together with London, participated for the first time in the Ulster Senior Hurling Championship, an innovation which we hope will help the cause of the development of the game in the Province. Clearly it will take much more than this initiative alone. In hurling development terms, particularly in the context of setting a benchmark for achievement, an Ulster Senior Hurling Championship, with all counties participating, is an essential ingredient. It was important that in negotiating access for Antrim to the Leinster Senior Championship, that the integrity of the Ulster Senior Hurling Championship was maintained. This is a position that we would like to see sustained well into the future. Derry's success in winning back to back Ulster U21 Hurling Championships once again shines a light on the quality of young hurlers available in the County and the dedicated efforts being made to promote the game there.

Whilst in the past there has been much comment in relation to the efficacy of the disciplinary process, there is no doubt that at Provincial level we had a much more settled year in this regard, contributed to in no small way by Sean McCague (Chairman) and Eamonn McMahon (Secretary) and the members of the Provincial Development Committee who function as the Provincial Hearings Committee. The complexities of the rules and processes in this area places a significant burden on voluntary administrators and we are very lucky indeed to have people of such a high calibre involved in these processes in the Province.

During the past year the unwarranted attacks on the premises of three GAA Clubs in Ulster brought a stark reminder of the hostility which has greeted the Association at various times in our history in the Province. In very recent times and before they completed their work and presented their Report, Dr. Robert Eames and Mr. Denis Bradley representing the Consultative Group on the Past, received a delegation from Comhairle Uladh. This provided a structured opportunity to raise, within a formal process, our enduring concerns in relation to attacks on GAA property in Ulster and more particularly and more poignantly the terrible violence and death visited on many members of our Association in the Province in the past, for no reason other than they were members of the GAA. This engagement was undertaken in a positive spirit and in order to place on record at official level the GAA's legitimate concerns in relation to past treatment. It has been done in a way that, hopefully, will allow the Association draw a line in the sand, move forward and play a full part in building a new future for everybody in Ulster and in Ireland. It is our assessment that the efforts of the Consultative Group on the Past can contribute to assisting the healing process and to recognising many of the wrongs which were experienced by the GAA in the Province. It is the type of process with which we should be prepared to engage into the future, in the right spirit and in a positive way.

A year ago I stated at our Ulster Convention that it was past time that the decision was made in relation to the proposed Multi-Sports Stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site. While technically a formal decision has yet to be made on this matter, it is as clear as daylight that this project will not proceed. Our involvement in the project and our preparedness to be part of a World Class Stadium solution, which would have been entirely publicly funded, was absolutely right. Let no one be in any doubt about the depth of the GAA's commitment to this project. A National Committee, including both the President and Ard Stiúrthóir and involving myself and Dónal Ó Murchú, Runaí Cúige was put in place to guide the GAA's involvement in the process. Past GAA President, Peter Quinn and past Ulster Council President, John O'Reilly represented the GAA on

Sub-Groups dealing respectively with the business case for, and the design of, the Stadium. The GAA independently employed its own Architect to review the draft plans and to ensure that the stadium design would be fit for purpose for gaelic games. The GAA's involvement was a critical component in terms of income generation and a major contributor to the financial viability of the project in terms of sporting events income. A formal Intention to Commit Document was signed by the GAA. The GAA was invited to be part of a visionary project and once that invitation was accepted we committed fully to the project and acted with integrity. Now that there is clearly a change in course, we must insist that any investment whatsoever in meeting the strategic stadium needs of sports in Ulster will be matched by an unbreakable commitment to meet the GAA's strategic stadium requirements in this Province. Our position is, and must remain, that there must be agreement in relation to how the strategic needs of all sports will be met before the particular interests of any one sporting organisation are served. In this regard 2009 will be an important, and I have no doubt a challenging year for us. It will be absolutely unacceptable if there is any further delay around these processes. We cannot afford to have our time wasted, nor will we accept that the strategic needs of the GAA in this context, will play second fiddle to anybody else's.

At National level one of the most important developments for many years was the publication of The GAA Strategic Vision & Action Plan 2009-2015. The strategic planning process which was embarked on in this Province many years ago, and which has been extended with our support to our counties, has paid dividends and will pay dividends well into the future in terms of the development of the GAA in the Province. We should be positive and enthusiastic about the strategic vision set out in our national plan and pay tribute to the leadership of the GAA on its production. The third Ulster Council Strategic Plan, which will be launched next month, embraces within it all of the targets for the Province set out in the National Plan. With the traditional enthusiasm and dynamism of the GAA in Ulster many of the targets and objectives set will be achieved well before the target dates set out at national level.

From an Ulster perspective, an important commitment in the GAA National Strategy is that “the Association will move from its current non sectarian policy to an anti-sectarian policy”. During 2009 Ulster GAA should, within its own structures, open up an internal discussion as to what this would mean for our Association here in practical terms. With the support of this Council we should explore what support, advice and guidance our units at Club, County and Provincial level would require in order to move towards realising this aspiration, which has at its core the extensive nature of what “community” actually means and the capacity of the GAA to be relevant to society everywhere.

During this year one of the most important initiatives which Ulster Council will involve itself with is the completion of the Strategic Plan for the development of the GAA in Belfast. We have worked jointly with Down & Antrim County Boards on the drafting work in relation to this plan and have had the specialist input and good advice of many other stakeholders. Belfast is our biggest urban centre in Ulster and it is Ireland’s second city. The myriad of challenges which it faces in terms of achieving the optimum development of the GAA are many and varied and they cross the complete spectrum from infrastructural deficits to huge pools of untapped playing talent at community level. We have a significant responsibility to create ways of putting in whatever resources are required in order to meet the objectives which will be set out in the Strategic Plan when it is launched in the very near future. Both Antrim and Down County Boards deserve our support and the support of the GAA at National Level in working on this agenda. However, what has to be achieved will also require considerable resources from public funds and we have a responsibility to assist both County Boards and their constituent clubs in making the case to government and to the Local Authorities for a new level of support to aid the planned developments. This is work that must be commenced this year.

The celebration of the 125th Anniversary of the GAA provides a fantastic opportunity for our Association at all levels to shine a light on exactly what our organisation means. We should engage in a creative and committed way to participating in all of the 125 events scheduled in the National Programme. The greatest celebration of this fantastic milestone can be achieved at local level and at county level, hence our intensive efforts since September of last year to provide a structured programme within this Province that will achieve the engagement of all GAA people in this celebration. It is particularly pleasing that the 125 celebratory effort in Ulster is a joint one between all of the gaelic games associations in the Province. I want to acknowledge the full participation by Ladies Gaelic Football, Camogie, Rounders, Handball and all of those involved in Scór and in Cultural and Heritage matters with the process. Because of their involvement and the ideas that they have brought forward the Clubs and County Boards and indeed all aspects of the GAA organisation throughout Ulster will have a level of guidance and support which will make their local tasks in celebrating the 125 all the easier to focus on.

Over the past year we have made significant progress in developing collaborative arrangements with the various GAA Awards initiatives which have existed in Ulster, in order to achieve synergy between Ulster GAA and these Award Schemes. This is something that can be further improved upon in 2009. This will be reflected in initiatives such as the Irish News Club and Volunteer awards, the Irish News Ulster GAA All Star awards, and, significantly a new co-operative arrangement between this Council and the Ulster GAA writers which we are working hard to finalise. Whilst these various branches of the media have their own job to do, and of course we have ours, there are far more areas of common interest between us than there are areas which divide us. By creating an atmosphere and an environment where there is regular engagement directly between the officers of this Council and the various media strata, the resulting synergy will only serve to do further good to the cause of promoting Gaelic Games in Ulster.

Notwithstanding this, it must be said that despite the progress that we have made in having the Football Championship restored to the TV screens, where an Ulster audience, through the combination of the BBC and RTE platforms could view all of the Ulster Championship games in 2008, we still have a considerable distance to go in order to achieve the level of gaelic games coverage in Ulster which the penetration of our Association at community level deserves. If we are going to make progress on this we have to call it as it is. There is a serious problem with the low level of coverage of Gaelic games by both BBC (in terms of both radio and television) and by UTV. While there may be little we can do in relation to achieving change with UTV we must redouble our efforts with BBC. We have to convince them, that as things stand at present, they are by a long-shot, failing the GAA in terms of their public broadcasting remit. It is our responsibility as a Provincial Council to bring this matter once again out into the open and to state clearly that we are unhappy with the current levels of coverage. We have already met with some of those who can influence change in the BBC in this regard but we have more to do. It is our job to convince them that our case is justified. Let me be clear about this. There is without doubt, the ability and the capacity in sports journalism terms within BBC to provide a level, a depth and a breadth of GAA coverage which would satisfy our expectations. However there appears to be a lack of will to fully deploy these resources. Over the coming year we must lobby those who allocate resources, those who do the scheduling and those who make the basic decisions as to what will be covered and what will not be covered, to take on board our concerns. We must convince them to work with us, in a positive way, to redress this deficit, which we are absolutely convinced exists.

Let us be clear also, that as an organisation, at both Provincial & National level we too have a responsibility to ensure that future contractual arrangements for TV rights facilitate, as a first requirement, the opportunity for everyone living in this country, if they so choose to do so, to turn on their radio or television and receive free to air broadcasts and television coverage of both Hurling & Football Championships and

indeed other games. This will be a stated objective in our new Strategic Plan; it will place an onus on this Provincial Council to lead out on this matter for Ulster with the media organisations and also to work internally within our own organisation at national level to achieve whatever change is required.

One of the great opportunities provided by the celebration of the 125 is to reflect on why the GAA was founded in the first place. The ideal of promoting and developing native pastimes, grounded in the revitalisation of Gaelic Games, had at its core the value of sport in society. Perhaps sometimes as we busy ourselves with all the administrative burdens that a massive voluntary organisation like the GAA places on us, we forget that promoting a sense of fun of enjoyment is all part of the sporting mix. Nowadays when we consider relationships at a societal level in Ulster, and seek to deal with the divisions that characterised life in the Province historically, we generally recognise that mutual respect and understanding are critical to achieving a better life and better society for all. Within our own Association there is no less a need for mutual respect and understanding in relation to the different roles that add up to what the GAA is all about – player/coach/mentor/manager/administrator/executive and the leadership positions that permeate the organisation on and off the field. The existing structures of the GAA were put in place with a view to ensuring that all of this worked well together in a way which would create synergy and which would keep a focus on the idea of promoting all that is good about Gaelic games and our Association, in a positive and progressive way. We clearly face many challenges to achieving and maintaining that synergy. However, despite all the obstacles thrown in the way of the Association, we are duty bound to keep trying to achieve the very best. If all of our actions are underscored by an approach that has mutual respect and understanding at their core it should certainly help us along the way.

As the GAA has developed, the expectations of its membership of those who fill leadership roles at Club, County, Provincial and National level have reached an all time

high. There is an unending pressure to do better at all levels in the Association. We cannot run a modern organisation without having a small and talented corp of full-time staff to support the broad base of voluntary workers. The GAA is not an easy Association to work for. We set high standards both for our volunteers and our employed staff and that is as it should be. However we have to be careful at all levels of the Association that in terms of our planning and management we only take from the world of corporate management, those attitudes and approaches which are appropriate to an Association whose main workforce is voluntary and who have to balance work and family commitments with their GAA involvements. We have to be careful in relation to the growing tendency for day-time meetings, day-time launches and media events and for the functioning of committees during normal working hours, which can only limit the pool of available talent to populate those structures into the future. We must always be open to more effective ways of working which keep the voluntary ethos of the GAA, which has served us so well for so long, to the fore. The importance of the community development ethos which characterises the GAA must always be kept in mind.

Rud eile atá íontach tabhachtach dúinn go léir ná An Ghaeilge. Sheas Comhairle Uladh leis an teanga i gcónaí. Molaim gach aon duine i gCúige Uladh a chuireann an teanga chun cinn. Molaim go specialta na daoine i gCumann Lúthchleas Gael sa Chúige seo, nach raibh aon seans acu an teanga a fhoghlaim ach go bhfuil meon na Gaeilge acu. Tá obair sár-mhaith a dhéanamh ar son na Gaeilge ag an gcoiste atá againn sa chúige seo agus tá an Comhairle ag comhoibriú anois le comhairlí aitiúla leis an teanga a chur chun cinn. Is í an tseod is luachmhaire atá againn mar náisiúin. Ba chóir tús áite a thabhairt di i gcónaí.

I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Nickey Brennan for his leadership of the GAA during the past three years and to especially thank him for the extent to which he has travelled to Ulster to participate in GAA events at all levels here. Because of the dynamic nature of the GAA in the Province he has visited here on countless occasions

and has been extremely generous with his time. We look forward to working with the incoming President of our Association, Christy Cooney, who also is no stranger to Ulster. Particularly through his involvement in the coaching and games development aspect of the GAA, he has a good understanding of what we are doing and where we want to go.

Today is a significant day for a number of long serving members of the Ulster Council, all of whom have served with distinction. As we bid farewell as members of the Council to Naul McCole, J.P.Graham, Patrick Óg Nugent & Joe McWilliams, we sincerely thank them for the generous contribution which they have made to the work of the Council through their time, energy and dedication.

While as an Association we face many challenges for the future, the spirit of the GAA has always been such that it has been able to meet those challenges full square. With a positive approach and our willingness to build synergy between all members of our Association, and all parts of it, there is no doubt that the future remains bright.

Finally, I wish to pay tribute to our Runaí Chúige, Dónal O'Murchú for his un-relenting work on behalf of the GAA. The extensive range of our activities in Ulster literally means 7 day weeks and we appreciate his tireless work. Sincere thanks to my fellow officers, fellow council members and the Chairmen and officers of our other Associations in the Province and of the 9 County Boards, and to the small team of full-time staff who serve the GAA so well.

Mar fhocal scoir a dhaoine uaisle, ta súil agam go mbeidh toradh maith ar ár gcuid oibre inniu ins an bhaile is sine in Éirinn agus go mbeidh Cumann Lúthchleas Gael níos láidre sa chúige dá bhárr.

Ar aghaidh le chéile

Tomás O'Dalaigh

28ú Feabhra 2009