

Oráid Uachtarán Chomhairle Uladh
26th Feabhra 2011

A Chairde Gael,

Cúis áthais domsa seasamh os bhur gcomhair inniu mar Uachtarán na Comhairle ar an ócáid seo, mo chéad Comhdhail mar Uachtarán. Mo bhuíochas arís as mé a thoghadh mar Uachtaran anuraidh agus mo bhuíochas as an chabhairr is an cinéaltais a léirigh sibh dom I rith nab liana. Bhí blain gníomhach again agus i`m thuairim blain ina rinneadh a lan dul chun cinn. Tá Cumann Lúthchleas Gael laidir I gCúige Uladh agus ta sé mar chúram orainne go léir an stadas sin a choinneail is a neartú. Cuirim fáilte romhaibh go leir, toscaire ó na naoi gcontae in Ultaibh, aoíanna speisialta is cairde. Ta súil agam go mbeidh lá fiúntach againn. Is deas bheith sa chathair stairiúl anso in Ard Mhacha agus tugaim buíochas do baill is Oifigigh Ard Mhacha as na socraithe go léir.

I had the pleasure of launching our “Live to Play” programme in Armagh on 10th December 2010. It is a fantastic initiative which aims to raise awareness among our members and patrons of the dangers on our roads. It is a worthy and patriotic project. At the launch I stated:

“There is nothing more important than life itself”.

I believe this to be profoundly true and hope our Live to Play campaign does indeed save lives, I believe the evidence shows it does.

However the truth of the primary importance of human life was brought tragically home on January 2011 with the news of the death of Michaela McAreavey. The news rocked all of us the GAA. The sadness and ongoing pain for Michaela’s husband John, her parents and family is horrendous. Once again I extend the deepest sympathies of all Ulster Gaels to the Harte and Mc Areavy families. I want to thank the Errigal Ciaran club and Tyrone GAA for the Christian charity shown then and now. Your support in the days around the tragedy was exemplary. Thanks to all County boards and GAA units in Ulster and throughout Ireland and world for the tremendous solidarity shown. I know the GAA support has been remarked upon and more importantly, has been a source of comfort to the families. Maith sibh, baill Cumann Lúthchleas Gael agus I measc leaba na naomh go raibh anam Michaela.

This has been a roller coaster year since I assumed office 12 months ago. I have attended almost 300 GAA events at Club, County, Provincial, National and International units of our Association. At games, meetings, functions, launches, openings, funerals and promotions I have seen first hand that the heart of GAA is strong, particularly in our own Province. Well done to you the county boards who oversee such excellent delivery of Gaelic games and have driven forward our Association.

When I review our success of 2010, I believe Ulster GAA is in a good place. All Ireland football final team was special, two Ulster teams competing, Down 1960 being honoured and Ulster school children at half time in mini games. Disappointment for Down but what grace and honour in defeat. Joy for the Tír Eoghain men again.

Tyrone minors were as good a minor team as has been seen in Croke Park. Well done chairman Ciaran McLaughlin and all involved with team management and county board. As a yardstick for Ulster GAA success our minor achievement in football is impressive. Tyrone's victory means Ulster teams have now contested 11 of the last 14 All- Ireland finals and have won 9. This I believe is testimony to the tremendous coaching and games development being carried out in our clubs, schools and counties and ably led by Ulster Council games and development committee, staff and coaches.

Ulster success in Gaelic football continued at club level when Ulster clubs won both the All Ireland club senior and Intermediate titles. Congratulations to Fr Rocks, Cookstown as Ulster and All Ireland Intermediate champions and it was joy unbridled when Belfast club St Gall's took the senior crown. The strength of our clubs continues with Lisnaskea Emmets recently winning the All Ireland Intermediate title and we wish Crossmaglen Rangers every success tomorrow in their semi-final. The clear power of Ulster teams continued when we witnessed yet another all-Ireland college's title coming to the province when St Colman's Newry captured the Hogan cup. We had Ulster teams in all the Allianz League finals with Ard Mhacha winning Division 2.

We still have not achieved the same success at All Ireland level in hurling yet, I believe there is progress. Muineachán collected a National title winning Division 4 Allianz league, Doire contested the Division 3 final while Dún na nGall lost out in the final of the Lory Meagher. But from an Ulster prospective, this was Ard Mhacha's year. At national level they won the Nicky Rackard cup with clear evidence of advancement at club and county level in the orchard county. At college level congratulations to Cross and Passion who won the All-Ireland B Colleges. So there is success but clearly there remains much work to be done in improving hurling standards.

In Ulster hurling, the very weakest counties remain weak, the middle tier counties show clear evidence of marked improvement and at the top in Ulster hurling, still no breakthrough to All-Ireland standard is yet evident. For illustration purposes I pick one county from each of the three tiers in Ulster. Antrim, once again won all our Ulster competitions. At all Ireland level the gap remains. We support Antrim's involvement in our own Ulster Championship and in the Leinster Championship, we believe their standard can be raised. Armagh clearly demonstrated that with a funded strategic plan, a county board committed to delivery and dedicated players there can be great success. Armagh contested the Senior county final this year, they contested the U-21 final, almost causing an upset, they contested the Ulster senior club final with Keady Lamh Dearg and as stated they won the Rackard cup, Armagh hurling is on the up. Finally an example from the lower tier - Cavan, no improvement here, County and club standards falling. A clear need for a strategy, more games, many more games, and an honesty from clubs. All games and competitions could not happen without our dedicated stewards and to them we are very grateful.

I congratulate our fellow Gaels in Ladies Football and Camogie for their continuing successes at all Ireland level. I was especially pleased to witness Ulster ladies win the inter-provincial competition, I hope we can shortly return to this competition in men's

codes. GAA Handball in Ulster is in a strong healthy position. Well done on the many successes recorded in the convention booklet. A special mention to Paul Brady, who has equalled the all time record at all Ireland wins and has set new records on the world stage.

Our games remain at the heart of everything we do. I was delighted to see from the records compiled by Stephen Donnelly that in Ulster in 2010, we played 22,025 games. This represents a 10% increase from 2009. The more games played the better. It is your, the county boards, biggest challenge. Players, club players want a regular games programme. The nonsense of playing in March, April, May with a long break in June, July and August has to stop. No prima donnas should exist in our clubs that hold up a games programme for the whole team. Play the games, let the players know when they are on and stick with the schedule. The clear improvement is to be welcomed, but more needs to be done, in some counties. The Ulster Council serves you well with games fixtures. We have 70 teams in our Ulster hurling league. Any club with ambitions for improvement needs to be competing here. Also in football, we have now an Ulster senior and intermediate league. The results show clearly that teams performing well in these leagues perform well in county championships. At the top end of competition we must always strive to raise standards and the Ulster leagues provide a platform for this. I urge greater involvement for clubs keen to raise the bar. Alongside our games programme is the need for coherent, organised and planned coaching. Our Comhairle Uladh Coaching Development programme in clubs, schools and counties has set a headline for GAA generally. Indeed among the 500 delegates at the recent O'Neill's Ulster GAA coaching conference in Cookstown were coaches from Cork, Dublin, Clare and Scotland. I congratulate the Ulster coaching committee under Gerard Bradley and Eugene Young for their excellent initiatives. We have set high standards in Ulster coaching; these standards need to be maintained and improved. In our counties and clubs, do ensure our coaches are fully accredited and have completed the required course for the team they coach. Our new ambitious coaches are tremendous; I fear some longer established team coaches do not see the need to do our courses, that mindset must change. On the other hand we must ensure our qualified and certified coaches are put to use in our clubs and counties. I see many qualified coaches with no team to coach! It is madness to have qualified coaches in your clubs and then import a "big name" who has no qualification, no standard. Apart from the financial folly of paying high travelling expense, the imported coach has neither the cert or the heart for your club. We are built on love of place, passion for our own. I urge our clubs and counties to seek to be self sufficient in all matters. I would not favour rules or regulations against "outside coaches". There has to always be room for commonsense and exceptions. There are times when the coach from the next parish is exactly what you need but this should be the exception. In general, we should ensure that our clubs and counties are run from within at both administration and coaching level. You don't travel three parishes or two counties away to bring in your chairmen and secretaries. Neither should you with coaches or trainers. Love of place cannot be bought or sold. Fanaigí dílis don bhun phrionsabail seo agus beidh clubanna is contaetha níos láidre da bharr.

Our coaching sessions must remain invigorating. We cannot expect to attract our youth to our association if our coaching is not enjoyable, challenging, fun, invigorating and very

well run. We need more games better quality coaching sessions and lots of fun. Games and sport should always be about fun. At adult level I believe we train too much. The ratio of training to games is too high. Less training but not less activity, less training with more games is I believe a better way forward. Like all rules in Treoirí Oifigiúl they should be obeyed and as senior officials of the GAA, as you all are in this room, we should ensure that all rules are observed. The closed season for inter county players came about from the universally acknowledged need for our top players to take a break. This is based on scientific research. There is debate around timing, length of break etc but all accept the need for a break. Again I urge our county boards to take control of affairs in your counties and ensure our players get the break they deserve and the break their body needs.

In March 2010 we opened the fabulous 3G pitch at Kingspan Breifne Park and recently, February 2011, we re-opened the magnificently re developed Athletics grounds here in Armagh city, Páirc Lúthchleasa, Ard Mhacha. The reopening of the Athletic grounds completes our county ground programme. All nine Ulster counties now have redeveloped county grounds with up to date facilities capable of hosting inter county hurling and football championship matches. This was the ambitious plan laid out by Comhairle Uladh in our very first strategy back in 2003 and now it has been achieved. It is a great achievement. I congratulate everyone involved at all levels along the way.

Our development of facilities with regional centres for clubs and counties continues apace with centres of excellence well advanced at Dunsilly, Antrim and Garvaghey Tyrone. Work is due to commence this year at Convoy Donegal and Owebeg Derry. These centres have been developed with assistance from the Strategic Investment Fund and Ulster Council. These centres when added to those at Breifne, Cloghan Monaghan and Lissan Fermanagh form a solid base for the growth of our Association in Ulster into the future. Our 2010 Ulster football finals were played on a splendidly resurfaced playing field at St Tiernach's Park in Clones. This has been a wonderful improvement on this historic ground which is the second most used ground in Ireland for inter-county activity.

Like all facilities, our county grounds, centres of excellence, club grounds indeed all GAA properties are all covered by very clear guidelines and rule on use. I thank all our units for adhering to our Association's rules on use of properties and in ensuring they are used exclusively for the promotion of our games. We need to be vigilant around all our properties and adhere to GAA rules.

In his excellent and detailed report to convention today Rúnaí Comhairle Uladh Dónal Ó Murchú, outlines our infrastructural developments. In it, he outlines frustrations over payments due to projects in Ulster. I certainly hope bureaucracy never stalls development and I hope issues surrounding payments to Ulster projects are resolved speedily.

The GAA strategic review 2002 identified the need for a major stadium in each Province and for many years, Ulster Council has pursued this objective. The provision of a major GAA stadium at Casement Park, Belfast is tantalisingly close. The capital funding

required has been included in the draft budget but final agreement is close but not yet achieved. An intense amount of work has been carried out on this project by many of our Association's volunteers, dedicated staff and a tremendous team of professionals with expertise in stadium development. As Uachtarán I am delighted to say that we have a superb project; a highly capable Project Group and a supportive Ulster Council Management. Our case for Casement has passed all the rigorous requirements of a project of this scale, we now await a political decision. Shortly after my election as Uachtarán I asked our Iar-Uachtarán Tomás O Dálaigh to chair our Stadium Project Group. Tom accepted and has carried out a tremendous job for which I am very grateful. There are now three crucial workgroups working under the overall direction of the Steering Project Group which Tom chairs. Ulster Council Coiste Bainistíochta appointed Tom as chair of the sub group dealing with Design and Planning, Peter Quinn to chair Governance and Finance and Dónall O Murchú to chair Community and Public Affairs. On behalf of Comhairle Uladh, I am grateful to all three along with our very committed staff who service these sub groups and to all members who sit on the various committees. I look forward as I know you all do, to positive announcements soon.

Last year at Convention I prioritised clubs and club development. Our Club Maith initiative is expanding rapidly, it is a great way for clubs to self assess, prioritise, seek advise and plan a strategy for improvement. I congratulate the clubs involved in the Club Maith programme and encourage even wider take up. The same clubs that apply for club maith, attend our coaching clinics and workshops, attend our club officer training and club and volunteer conferences. These are the active committed progressive Ulster clubs and I am delighted and heartened by the ever increasing number of truly active clubs. However some counties have bigger issues with club inactivity than others. There are a minority of clubs that apply for nothing, attend nothing and appear to progress little. I urge counties to asses the club activity in your own counties, our staff will be delighted to advise and help, encourage or push as the case may be the inactive clubs into life. All our children deserve an active progressive club in their area. Do not let them down.

The Irish news club and volunteer conference was once again a great success. With these conferences, workshops, club maith, officer training, integration advice, wellbeing workshops, coaching courses etc Ulster Council has a vast menu of help for clubs. Those that use it are improving and winning. Don't forget we are GAA clubs. All games for both sexes should be on our menu. We are Gaelic clubs and the Gaelic ethos should be evident at your clubs from the entrance gate to the dressing room and onto the pitch. Our clubs need to be hives of activity with hurling football, camogie, handball, rounders, Scór agus Gaeilge all in evidence for boys and girls. Our clubs must remain fully committed to the volunteer ethos of GAA. We work for our clubs because we belong with our clubs, they are of us. In these difficult times it is madness for good club volunteers to sell lottery tickets in order to fund the travelling expenses of a guest but distant living coach. Self sufficient clubs, full Gaelic menu and powered by volunteers; that is our mission, it is our strength and must remain our cornerstone.

These are difficult times in our country but hope does spring eternal. The GAA was founded in difficult times and prospered through challenging periods. We must keep

offering hope, the pitch is always half full never half empty. Raymond Munroe speaking to our coaching conference in January told the coaches “You can achieve if you believe and you will achieve if you work hard at it.” The same strong philosophy applies to all aspects of our lives. Ireland will recover, we will achieve and the GAA will encourage that achievement. I welcome initiatives for county players to help with employment and re-training. But don’t forget our club players, they too will need your support, guidance and help. Encourage youth of your clubs to get involved. I recently visited the Killevan Sarsfields club in Monaghan. I admired their skilfully drawn plans for development. I spoke with the young technician who drew the plans. He did it all for his club for free, he did because he is now unemployed and had time available. Since drawing the club plans he has got some enquiries and some commissions for his services. There are opportunities for everyone, be alert to the members needs and encourage participation. We have long had a rule, (rules again!) of support for Irish industry. As practical patriots, we believe in buying Irish, where possible. Irish gifts trophies, equipment, gear as far as possible we should always be Irish, think Irish, buy Irish. They are Irish jobs and need our support. I feel I need to emphasise that for the GAA, made in Newry is as Irish as made in Navan and bought in Enniskillen is as Irish as bought in Enniscorthy - one island, all Irish.

We continue in Comhairle Uladh to reach out to those who may not have traditionally embraced our Association. We actively work on a number of fronts with a diverse range of groups to promote inclusion and as an Association we are actively anti-sectarian and anti-racist. Our flagship outreach project surrounding the cross community Cúchulainn team is widely acknowledged as a crucial builder of a shared future for our young people in this province. In July 2010 we travelled to New York with the Enniskillen Cúchulainns. Drawn from differing traditions the boys did what young men do best, had fun made friends and marvelled at New York. The support of the Irish Government, Croke Park and our own resources enable this project to happen and we are grateful. It does make a difference, though on a small scale, yet significant barriers are broken down.

We met during the past year, all the major political parties in the six counties and all churches. We promote understanding and friendship and threaten no one or no organisation. We remain honest to all. We encourage friendship but we never hide our Gaelic Irish ethos. It remains at the heart of our Association and while celebrating diversity, we never hide our distinctive Gaelic Irish identity. That identity is best exemplified in our support for our language throughout the Association. Whenever and wherever possible we support the use of our Irish language and I particularly congratulate the clubs and counties that I visit where the language is to the fore.

Tá coiste na Gaeilge againne in Ultaibh faoi stiúr Jack Devaney agus tá plean suimiúl le leamh sa leabhairín don chomhdháil. Molaim an dea oibre atá idir lámha acu agus guím gach rath ar an obair. Tá fo choiste ann a reachtálaíonn cursa de Faoite sna Dúnaibh.

Téann an cursa ó neart go neart agus is fiú dul ann. Tá pleannanna ag an choiste chun an cursa a leathnú agus guím dea ghuí ar an obair seo. Tá fo choiste eile againn ag amharc ar ainmeacha na gclubanna. Tá siad ag cur ainnm ceart I nGaeilge ar ghach chlub sa chúige agus cuideoidh an database seo go mór leis na clubanna. Tá foireann lán ghaelach againn I mbéal Feirste sin Laochra Loch Lao. Sa Ghaeltacht I dTír Chonaill ta roinnt mhaith clubanna lan ghaeilge againn agus molaim iad go hard chun an Ghaeilge a choinneal

beo. Beidh comórtas peil na Gaeltachta ar siúl I gCloch Cheann Fhaola, Tír Chonaill I Meitheamh agus guím gach rath ar seo.

We actively support the use of our club and townland names in Irish and I congratulate the counties involved with these initiatives. Clubs that organise language classes and have links with Gaelscoileanna are to be commended.

Scór also provides an opportunity to enhance the Gaelic ethos in our clubs and I thank everyone involved in running Scór and Scór na nOg. Ulster Scór winners continue to perform well nationally and I am glad we are able to give profile to our Scór groups and performers at club functions and our games. Every club should participate in Scór with the emphasis on entertainment, fun and promoting our Irish heritage. Play down the competitiveness and play up the fun.

We launched the Monaghan GAA strategic plan during the year. All nine Ulster Counties have now strategic plans in place. This is an important milestone; the challenge now is to ensure we deliver on aims in the strategies. Change and adaptation in strategies is important and I would encourage all counties to re-read, readjust, adapt, change if necessary but deliver.

Our youth are our best asset and fantastic work takes place in our schools. We thank all teachers for their work for Gaelic games in schools at primary, secondary and third level. Remember, we in the GAA need teachers more than they need us. Always value and support the schools and teachers that promote our games. We are grateful for the access to schools for our coaches and we appreciate the time put in by teachers to coaching, organising and playing competitions at all levels. In the three counties of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal teachers are now asked to work an extra hour per week, yet work with teams and support does not qualify as additional time. Despite this nonsense, we in the GAA appreciate the voluntary efforts of our schools and teachers, continued success to you all. Clubs organise great underage programmes and the Go Games model is the correct one. Please ensure that with blitzes and small sided games we don't lessen games activity. Go Games can be competitive and should be regular. The growth of summer camps is satisfying. The officially endorsed VHI Cul Camps is, I believe, a good standardised model. It is good for promotion and has a return for all counties. All counties and clubs should ensure they organise Cul Camps in addition to their own camps if necessary. Our youth promotion in Ulster is strong, focussed and well organised. The National Féile na nOg finals held in Derry were a fantastic display of the strength of GAA among our youth and Derry were superb hosts.

I am disappointed we did not have an Inter-Provincial competition this year. Ulster counties miss it and have a strong desire to see it re-instated. Central Council will soon decide on its future and counties should discuss it and ensure their views are heard. Again, to be consistent I support the rule book and this official competition should be played as per An Treoirí Oifigiúl. Sense of place and sense of belonging to this Province of Ulster is strong. This togetherness helped this Province through difficult days in recent history. We appreciate our bond as Ulstermen and women. I, a Cavan man, am as much

an Ulsterman as our Secretary from Down! We should not allow our Inter-Provincial be consigned to history. Our players have no higher level to play at than the Provincial team and they deserve a competition they clearly want.

The provincial council has many challenges; Urbanisation of our province is a big challenge and we will re double our efforts over the next year on our development work in Derry and Belfast particularly. Emigration is, I know, a major issue in many clubs and counties. As I said earlier, we have to give hope and provide wise counsel with practical supports where possible. Clubs may face amalgamations, competitions with less than 15 players, all these are possibilities. There are schemes available where young unemployed can do good work for the club and get back on the employment ladder. Ulster Council staff can assist and advise on these schemes and I urge you to engage. Last weekend Danny and I attended the Canadian GAA Convention in Toronto. We are twinned with Canada. They carry out tremendous work from Vancouver to Newfoundland. They provide a fantastic home from home for young Irish emigrants. Their clubs are bursting with new members; Toronto Gaels recently processed 32 new membership applications from Ireland. Our loss is their gain but from our work with Canada, I can reassure our members at home that our emigrants overseas are well looked after. The growth in Canada is clear evidence of the increasing internationalisation of GAA. A database of club contacts overseas should be established to assist intending emigrants and facilitate early contact with GAA units overseas.

Referees deserve respect and support; we are well served in Ulster with great officials who provide an excellent service. Though often criticised they cannot and do not answer back. All of us need to fully support our referees in good times and bad. Their role is advancing and changing at great speed and I urge you then county leaders to fully support and respect them at all times. Thanks to Joe Jordan as chair and Tiernach Mahon as referee administrator.

Our sub committees are working well. Our voluntary chairmen and members do a great job and I thank you all. Voluntary commitment is both strong and healthy in Ulster. With the best will in the world, our plans and dreams could not be implemented without our Ulster Council staff. I thank all staff. As well as their professional duties they too are Volunteers. Our staff assist at all levels and I publicly acknowledge them all for their excellent work.

Our Rúnaí Dónall O Murchú is a deeply committed official. He is imbued with all that is best in GAA and provides us with a magnificent service. I want to thank all members of Comhairle Uladh for your help, courtesy, advise and assistance. I wish our retiring members well. Today we bid farewell to JP Graham, Jim Murray, Chris Brown and Tomás O Dálaigh. Jim, Chris and JP have served the council well on a number of fronts and I wish you well. Sincere thanks to my fellow officers, Martin, Michael, Oliver, Danny and Tom. Martin, Michael and Oliver have worked hard on your behalf on a range of issues, they represent Comhairle Uladh well and I thank them for their work and support. Tomás O Dálaigh and myself came on the council together 23 years ago under the then Presidency of the late Fr. Dan Gallogly. Tom completes his tenure today and we

all wish him and his wife Frances well. Tom has served the Council on every committee, he has been treasurer; vice chairman; and from 2007 to 2010 he served as Uachtarán. In all his work and duties Tom has been exemplary. On your behalf I thank Tom for this extraordinary voluntary service. In the parable of the talents, we are called upon to use our talents for others and to increase them. Tom Daly has done both. So we say farewell, a chara, today. For personal and professional reasons, Tom has decided not to contest the position of Uachtarán Cumann Lúthchleas Gael. Though Tom has chosen not to contest this position, there will be other possibilities for his many talents. Once again I thank my friend Tom for his years of service. I know you join with me in wishing him well and may the wind be always at your back.

May 2011 be kind for all of us, I wish you the nine counties well in your stewardship of CLG in our Province. Everything we do, we should aim to do it well, tell everyone about the great things in GAA and encourage more to join us. Aim high, reach for the stars and in all our work be faithful to the guiding principles of the GAA.

Tá síul agam go mbeidh Comhdháil fiúntach againn. Táim ag síul go mór le dul chun cinn sa bhliain romhainn. Beir bua agus ar aghaidh linn le chéile.

Aogán O Fearghail.
Uachtarán,
Chomhairle Uladh
26ú Feabhra 2011