

**Convention 2012 Address made by Aogán O Fearghail Uachtarán Chomhairle Uladh CLG
Saturday 25th Feburary 2012 St. Mary's University College Belfast**

Óráid an Uachtaráin 2012

A Chairde Gaeil,

Cúis áthais dom labhairt libh inniu, an dara uair mar Uachtarán na comhairle. Sílim fo bhfuil sé fóirstineach go bhfuil muid bailithe le chéile i mBéal Feirste, i ndiaidh fhógairt seasca a haon ponc a ceathair milliún punt sterling do ath thógáil Páirc Mhic Asmaint. Beidh an togra se ar cheann de na mór tionsnaimh i gCumann Lúthchleas Gael sna blianta romhainn, ní amháin in Ultaibh ach ar fud na tíre. Is dea scéal é go mbeidh stadium den scoth again sa chúige agus tá lúcháir orm gur fháiltigh na naoi gcontae an togra seo daon ghuth. Cúis áthais dom fosta go bhfuil an Comhdháil seo ar siúl i mBéal Feirste i lár na Gaeltachta. Tá muid bailithe le chéile i gceantar Gaeltachta, an Ghaeltacht is úra sa tír agus an Ghaeltacht Chathrach is mó sa tír. Molaim gach rud a dhéanann an pobal anseo ar son na Gaeilge agus tá Comhairle Uladh lán taobh thiar do ghluaiseacht na Gaeilge anseo sa Cheathrún Gaeltachta, Béal Feirste.

The absence of our esteemed secretary Danny Murphy casts sadness on our convention. I know you join with me in sending him our collective best wishes, our sincere thanks for his heroic contribution to the Ulster Council GAA and our prayers and goodwill for a speedy return to the helm at Comhairle Uladh.

Casement Park

I am pleased to welcome you all to our annual convention. The Ulster Council GAA gathers today in Belfast's Gaeltacht on our council's 109th birthday and I address you as the council's 34th President. I am pleased that we are holding convention in Belfast for two reasons. Firstly this convention comes towards the end of a momentous month for the GAA in Ireland, Ulster and particularly for the GAA here in Ireland's second city. The project to deliver a new 40,000 all seater stadium at Casement Park is now in full flow. The re development of Casement Park will be a fantastic boost for Gaelic games in the northern half of Ireland. There are many fabulous GAA venues in the South and deep south. The GAA strategic review back in 2002 identified the need for a major stadium in Ulster. The Ulster Council, pursued this ambition on behalf of the association. An opportunity arose to build a multi sport stadium on the Maze site. We said Yes, we fully participated in the early stages of the Maze proposal and were disappointed when the project was abandoned. When the Maze project collapsed the three main sporting bodies, Soccer, Rugby and GAA were asked to prepare plans for their own separate stadia developments. The Ulster Council researched the possibilities of a green field development or the re development of an existing facility. We surveyed the options and got valuable assistance from independant consultants. The evidence was overwhelmingly in favour of re developing Casement Park. The Ulster Council

have pursued this option with vigour over the past 5 years. Ulster Council management were fully informed, fully supportive and full behind every advancement over all this period. Events have moved swiftly and in summary I want to place on record the momentous decisions taken over the past year. The outline business case for Casement Park was approved by DCAL/DFP and Sport NI in April 2011. We submitted our business plan in July 2011 and this was approved in December 2011. On February 8th we received a letter of offer from Sport NI. In it, we were offered 61.4 million sterling to re develop Casement. Our Ulster Management committee considered carefully the letter of offer on February 9th 2012 and decided unanimously to accept the offer. The letter of offer contained a requirement for the GAA to contribute 15 million sterling. We travelled to Croke Park on February 15th that delegation included our senior staff and officers of the council along with Tom Daly, Stadium Board Chairman. We held discussions with the President, Director General and Director of Finance. They supported the project and agreed to fund the 15 million GAA contribution. We then proceeded to GAA Management Committee where Tom Daly and I presented to Management. Our project was warmly welcomed, supported enthusiastically and unanimously approved to award £15 million sterling to the project. On Thursday February 16th 2012 our full Ulster Council met in Armagh. The full details of the project were outlined to the members from the nine counties. The project and all implications were fully discussed. I was thrilled that the complete project was unanimously endorsed by the full Ulster Council and particularly pleased that all nine counties represented spoke strongly in favour of the project. So Casement Park, 40,000 all seater stadium, a stadium fit for Ireland's second city will now be built.

I believe this is a visionary project that we will all delight in in the years ahead. A modern GAA stadium is what is needed and deserved by GAA in Ulster. I appreciate the warm whole hearted support for the project from all Ulster Gaels. As an association we have always been good at looking at the "bigger picture". More than most, Gaels realise that there are times when the greater good is served by combining for the big prize, putting aside sectional interest to advance what is best for all. The Casement project comes at the end of an unprecedented period of investment for GAA in Ulster. Ulster Council working closely with clubs and county boards have secured major funding for all nine counties this past number of years. The Ulster Council has assisted clubs and counties secure £18m sterling from government for various capital projects. As a council we worked actively with our 9 county boards and have secured €8 million for our counties from the GAA's NISC fund. We have invested €8 million euro in the floodlighting modernisation programme across the province and a further £6 million in county venues in the six counties. If you include the recent 61.4 million sterling for Casement, the Ulster Council has secured just over £100 million for clubs and counties from a variety of sources. This is the level of service Comhairle Uladh has been pleased to deliver for all our nine counties past number of years.

I greatly appreciate your unanimous endorsement of the Casement project. So many people have worked diligently over a long period and I thank them all. I thank the Ulster

council officers, members and staff, I thank the Antrim Co. Board whose support was essential and I thank our leadership in Croke Park. Too many to name but I specifically thank the chairman of the Stadium Project Board, Tom Daly. Tom is the former President of the Ulster Council, has skilfully navigated the project through, what were at times, stormy waters. I sincerely thank Tom for his astute handling of this project on our behalf.

It is true to say that the delivery of the Casement Park stadium is in many respects, the crowning achievement of our provincial council secretary, Danny Murphy. Danny has guided the project from its earliest days; he has been wise, reflective, strategic and at all times Danny has been true to GAA needs. Danny, among many talents and interests is also a poker player. There have been many occasions when the skill of the poker player were evident as Danny always seemed to *“know when to hold èm and when to fold èm”*. On your behalf I thank Danny for his vision and delivery. The senior staff have all played crucial roles in this project ,I acknowledge and thank all staff especially Geraldine Mc Kavanagh, Michelle Mc Aleer, Ryan Feeney and Stephen Mc Geehan who play a lead role in the delivery of the Casement project. I want to sincerely thank all members of our Ulster Council management committee which includes all the council officers along with Joe Jordan, Jack Devanney and Gerard Bradley. I also thank the members of all the stadium sub committees who invest so much voluntary time to this development. The business case has been accepted by all, Ulster Council day to day operations have been protected, The Executive will contribute 81% of the capital costs and GAA at national level in Croke Park will contribute the remaining 19% Casement park will be built and I look forward to sitting in it at an Ulster final in 2016.

Our convention booklet for today’s convention details the record of achievement this past 12 months. It is a detailed account in the form of reports, pictures and statistics of a vibrant, confident, busy and forward looking body. I congratulate everybody involved in compiling and contributing to this impressive record. I will not repeat what is contained in these reports, I endorse and support what is recorded in these pages. Today in my speech to convention I want to look forward, to build on our achievements and offer some insights on where the future might or should take us.

GAA Values

In particular today I want to constantly ask two questions,

- 1. What are our core values**
- 2. Who runs the GAA in our clubs and counties.**

Clubs remain our cornerstone. If clubs are strong, well organised, happy, busy places then we will attract and retain members. All clubs should seek to attract the whole family and retain them for the whole of their lives. Clubs are where we interface with our communities, with the public and I urge all our county delegates to at all times put club activity, club organisation and crucially club excellence at the top of your agendas. We all

love our own place, as poet Seamas Heaney said: “the place of our first imaginings” Pride of place remains central to all things GAA. We work voluntarily on the field and of it for the local club because we love our own place, we have an attachment , it is our patch and with our friends and neighbours we share the sadness and happiness. You don`t choose your club, it chooses you. You don`t select a club, you are born to it. We must be vigilant to always inculcate that sense of loyalty to place among our members. No matter what short term gain some may seek, it is not the GAA way to allow anybody from anywhere to play with any club in any county. If you allow anything, anything will happen and building on anything will lead to collapse. Stand firm in defence of our clubs and our counties and stand firm in building the great love and pride in place that the GAA is built on.

All-Ireland Club Championships 2012

I`m looking forward to St Patrick`s day. The club championships have been a great success and this year will be special for all Ulster Gaels as we will head to Croke Park to support Loughiel Shamrocks and Crossmaglen Rangers. Both these Ulster clubs have a strong sense of their heritage and place and both are clubs that never forgot the communities where they are located. It is fabulous to see them in Páirc an Chrócaigh. The sense of place in our province extends from family to club to county to province to country. So as Crossmaglen and Loughiel take the field on St Patrick`s day, all Ulster Gaels will be Shamrocks and Rangers. We will all share in the occasion and hopefully we will all bask in reflected glory of a double for Ulster in the club finals.

Indiscipline

Indiscipline diminishes any human being. Violence, aggression, cheating, bullying, intimidation and injustice are always wrong and have no place in the GAA. We play thousands of games without incident; the vast majority of games are pleasant, robust yes, but sporting affairs. The few nasty incidents however, diminish all of us. I am saddened by arguments within the association over the aftermath of ugly incidents. There is much debate on punishments, too harsh or not harsh enough, debate on appeals, they should they shouldn`t. I am saddened by the tug o war questioning of CCC`s of CHC`s, CAC`s, DRA`s and more. Argument over how to deal with indiscipline loses sight of the real issue, the real cause of the problem which is the original act of indiscipline itself. Justice must always prevail and players dealt with unfairly or harshly deserve their rights protected. I fear that in all the debate over process we may miss the real issue and that issue is the original aggressive act when it occurs. We must be vigilant, I don`t believe we have a particularly acute problem with indiscipline in the GAA but when it does arise , we must all condemn it. Counties should ensure justice and fair play for their members but should never defend the indefensible. We all have a role to play, referees decisions should not be challenged by you, senior county officers, this sends out all the wrong messages, abusive supporters/mentors or officials need to be corrected. Our sidelines are overcrowded with an ever growing number of advisers, experts , statisticians and well meaning enthusiasts. At far too many

games there are two teams on the pitch and two more on the sideline. I urge county officers to implement the rules and guidelines on match officials at our games. I believe our disciplinary structures are fair, it is not the disciplinary procedures that create the problems ,it is the original act of indiscipline, let us stay focussed on that fact. Finally on this subject, when a referee steps out on the field of play, he or she represents the association. That means he represents you and all our members and our official guide, An Treoraí Oifigiúl. If we disrespect the referee, we disrespect ourselves and the GAA. Let`s not get caught up in debates about how we handle the outcome of indiscipline ,let us keep our focus on indiscipline ,condemn it and work together to stop it.

Club and Volunteers

The enthusiasm of our club, county and provincial volunteers is heartening. We started volunteer training in Armagh in January with over 170 county officers attending. We have continued around all counties with over 200 club volunteers attending training each Saturday morning. Their sense of place is incredible; their love of club and hunger to be the best they can be is uplifting. Our volunteers want to excel, to be the best they can be but crucially, they want this not for themselves but for their club and county. We had another hugely successful coaching conference three weeks ago with over 400 delegates. Every week night we hold a coaching course somewhere in the province, always well attended and always beneficial. I thank all our staff involved in planning and delivering these courses, especially Eugene Young who alongside coaching Chairman Gerard Bradley heads up the best games development programme in Ireland. We as voluntary leaders set visions and plans but we rely on full time staff to deliver and I thank them for their great work. I compliment the volunteers who attend all these events. You are our lifeblood.

Intergration and “One Club Model”

In Ulster we have long championed integration of all Gaelic codes in one closely knit family unit. We warmly endorse the recent one club proposals and I encourage all of you to actively facilitate closer working and co-operation between all our codes hurling, handball, football, camogie, scór, rounders agus tacaíocht don ghaeilge. Together we are stronger. Stronger clubs offering all our games are more attractive to the public and are more exciting to our members. Make sure the full menu of GAA is available through your club and the benefits will accrue. Last night I had the pleasure of attending the St Peters club annual function in Warrenpoint, Co Down. They are a platinum Club Maith winner and in their club they have teams in all GAA codes male and female alongside a full Scór entry. This should be the ambition for all units. Finally on this note I hope any remaining GFC`s rename as soon as possible, we are GAA and not just Gaelic football clubs.

Club and County Governance

Emigration and financial pressures are causing big problems for many clubs and county boards. I can offer no solutions but I do urge caution. I know you all take care of finances well, I urge you now, take even more care. Watch expenditure carefully and ensure developments are necessary and can be funded. Hard raised money for clubs and counties should be managed carefully and within the rules of the association. We must all work to rebuild our economies locally and nationally and our young players do deserve all our efforts in gaining employment. Unemployment can devastate young lives and we need to be vigilant, supportive and imaginative. Without young players clubs cannot survive. Counties have to support clubs to stay active in lean times in the expectation of better times ahead. Being aware of this crisis for some clubs is the first step to helping them.

Emigration, Culture and GAA identity

Emigration can lead to bleak outcomes for clubs at home but it is comforting to note our overseas GAA clubs are welcoming homes for our young emigrants when they do leave our shores. It is a comfort for their families and clubs to know how well they are cared for abroad. The Ulster Council in the past 12 months have taken on a new range of responsibilities in our twinning arrangements. We are the lead partner in the twinning process with Canada, Scotland and Britain. We work actively with the GAA clubs in these countries and we support the clubs with courses, training, referees, advice and guidance. We act in their interest here at home and I thank everybody involved with our twinning partnerships. Ulster emigrants are very much to the fore in clubs around the globe and we keep contact with them and support where we can. The GAA is now global and this is a direction we must travel in the future. But the GAA globally or here in Ireland will have no relevance if we abandon core beliefs. Whether it's the Ulster club in San Francisco, Tír Chonaill Gaels in London, Casements in Toronto or Loughiel Shamrocks here in Antrim, all GAA clubs are Gaelic. Without that Gaelic ethos, GAA clubs will wither on the vine. Our clubs in Ulster have remained strong to our Gaelic heritage and we must remain so. Our convention today is taking place in the Belfast Gaeltacht quarter where the Irish language is spoken widely on the streets and in homes. No matter where your club or county is located we must all ensure that our language and culture is used supported and enthusiastically promoted. Thank you to the many who promote Scór in club and county. As we move towards 2016 I urge all counties to work earnestly to ensure full participation by all clubs in Scór, language and heritage activities. Clubs that lose sight of their Gaelic ethos are in danger of losing sight of our Gaelic mission which is the very reason for our existence. Fanaigí dílis don teanga is don chultúr i gcónaí. Gabhaim buíochas na comhairle do ghach duine a oibríonn go díograiseach ar an chúrsa gaeilge sna Dúnaibh. Dún na nGall, i mi lúil gach blain. Buíochas fosta daoibhse ar fad a reachtálaíonn Scór is ranganna gaeilge in ár gclubanna. Sibhse na fíor Gaeil. Agus molaim go hard na clubanna gaeilge. Anseo sa cheathrún gaeltachta tá Laochra Loch Lao agus cuireann said an teanga is na cluichí chun cinn i gcónaí. Tá méid mór clubanna gaeltachta i dTír Chonaill agus tugaim buíochas na comhairle daoibh ar fad as seasamh chomh daingean sin ar son na Gaeilge. Bhí comórtas

peile na gaeltachta i gCloch Cheann Fhaola anuraidh is beidh sé i nGaoth Dobhair i mbliana. Deis iontach an comórtas seo chun meon na nGael a léiriú is a chothú agus guím gach rath ar chlubanna gaeilge ar fud na cúige.

Match Attendances and Community Engagement

The club championships in Ulster, late in 2011 attracted record attendances. The recent Mc Kenna cup also broke records for those attending. Our cut price season ticket was well received, games were of a high quality and our supporters were well pleased. I was glad that First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy first minister Martin Mc Guinness attended the Mc Kenna cup final. The GAA has always been a force for healing and re building in this country and we pleased that Peter Robinson has attended our games and has paid tribute to the work of our association. He was warmly received at the Mc Kenna cup final and will be again whenever he attends further games. The GAA in Ulster is pleased to play its role in building meaningful reconciliation in our communities. Our Cúchullains project continues to promote good relations among our second level schools across the province and many friendships have been built through participation in the project. I thank all the schools that warmly support our Cuchullain teams and thank the parents for bravely moving forward with Cuchullains teams based on mutual respect of each others traditions. No one has to surrender their heritage or tradition to be respectful and considerate of others.

Schools

Our schools do enormous work for the GAA. Cumann na mBunscol at primary level brings thousands of young children into our association for the first time, gives them a taste of GAA and in most instances young players who play GAA for the first time in primary schools stay with the GAA for life. I thank all the primary teachers for their outstanding contribution and urge all clubs to make sure they have an active schools co-ordinator. Links between primary school and club are absolutely vital for the growth of GAA. Ulster`s second level schools at both colleges and vocational sector are outstanding. Most successful minor and senior county players begin their competitive playing careers on successful second level school teams. Ulster colleges and Ulster Vocational schools deserve our gratitude. They also deserve our facilities and freedom to play their games. Too often I hear of schools being refused pitches and of tournaments clashing with second level schools competitions. It is a condition of permission to run a tournament that it does not cut across official competitions. Schools and colleges competitions are official competitions and I intend to see to it that tournaments do not interfere with their fixture programme. Likewise GAA facilities are for all our units and our schools who do so much nurturing of our games deserve the use of our pitches. I expect our county boards will comply.

Third Level

Third level universities and colleges are all centres of excellence and performance. It is too narrow a view to see them as in any way a threat to county panels. I believe the opposite is true, our third level teams are a fantastic development school for our county teams. I thank the universities and colleges for sharing their facilities with us and for coaching our players to such high performance standards. Counties should progressively approach fixture issues regarding young players at third level. These are the players where burnout is a very real issue. We cannot continue to place ridiculous demands on players at this level. Counties have to take control and put the players welfare at the centre of decisions, county boards need to ensure that coaches and team managers at club , college and county level do not place unreal and unfair demands on these players.

Leadership

For County Chairpersons in particular , you are in charge of the GAA in your county, not Croke Park or Ulster Council, not colleges and not team managers ,you county boards led by County Chairperson are in charge and you need to take decisions for the good of the GAA as a whole. County boards decide who is and who is not eligible to play for his county. Expenditure, policy and rule interpretation are all functions of county boards, it is vital that county chairmen and county boards remain in charge of the GAA in the counties.

Discussion document on Status of County Managers

There is debate currently on whether we should pay members to manage our teams or whether we should expect team managers to act as volunteers like our county chairmen. There are reports of clubs and counties breaking association rules by paying more than legitimate expenses to team managers. Some argue that by legally paying the team manager we will eliminate this problem. I welcome the debate and I see its outcome as pivotal to the future direction of our association. I do not favour paying team managers a wage as association employees to look after our teams. I certainly favour paying managers all legitimate expenses allowed for under our rules. To start paying full time managers to our county teams would remove at once all the business men, all the teachers, builders, and voluntary coaches we currently have. For a paid manager cannot be a full time manager and a full time teacher or full time engineer. Would paying managers remove the problem of illicit payments? Would making legal what is currently illegal remove the problem. In Holland they legalised certain drugs in the expectation that the drug problem would disappear, it didn't happen , the opposite, it escalated. How do you remove an employee on a contract. How do you develop sense of place and pride in sport among those who no longer perform their role for the love of it , for Corinthian values. The GAA has and needs full time employees to deliver on many aspects of our association's plans and projects. But our managers and players and those of us in administration should be volunteers. If we pay team managers at county level why not pay those at club level where some clubs are actually bigger than county boards. Paying managers is all about seeking quick fix victories, they don't happen. We have higher aspirations of service and loyalty and adherence to

Gaelic values. Paying managers would fundamentally weaken our amateur ethos and we cannot allow this to happen.

There is an attempt to start a Gaelic officials association for referees, umpires and linesmen. What next, a county chairman's association, a Gaelic lottery sellers society and perhaps a scór adjudicators union. We have one GAA for all and that should be enough for us all. Sectional interest groups will weaken the overall effort, stand firm by the official guide, the GAA is built on community and the opposite of community is individual. We must remain a coherent community of Gaels, where everyone is valued for their contribution and not splinter in sectional interest groups based on an agenda for the individual, there is no "I" in the word team.

I thank all sub committee Chairpersons and members. There is great developmental work in Ulster GAA. The level of volunteerism and commitment to local club is outstanding. I attend many club and county events and I constantly marvel at the wonderful energy and commitment of so many, we must preserve this and anything that might weaken the voluntary efforts of our membership should be resisted.

Handball

Later this year the world handball championships come to Ireland, For Ulster this will be an exciting time as we have world champions in Fiona Shannon and Paul Brady. I hope handball continues its fantastic growth following the world games. One walled handball is huge in schools and club halls at present and will be an Olympic game. Clubs and county boards should do all they can to promote handball and rounders alongside camogie, hurling and Gaelic football . Development work at underage in clubs is key to future success and all energies should go into our juvenile programmes for all our codes.

Staff

I want to thank our Ulster Council staff. The work they carry out at all levels is outstanding. I know the assistance they offer your counties is greatly appreciated and on your behalf, I thank our staff for their professional, efficient and courteous service.

Director General and GAA President

Páraic Duffy will be here after lunch and I thank Páraic for his integrity and hard work on behalf of our association, I also thank his staff in Croke Park for their commitment and effective delivery of our aims and plan. Christy Cooney will soon complete his three year term as Uachtarán Chumann Lúthchleas Gael. Christy has been an energetic President who has defended our association core values while moving us forward in an ever changing Ireland. I thank Christy for his dynamic leadership and warmly welcome his successor Liam O Neill who I know will lead this association with clarity, sincerity and purpose.

Conclusion

I thank all the members of Comhairle Uladh, my fellow officers, Danny, Martin, Michael and Oliver for their wisdom, hard work and loyal service to Comhairle Uladh. Thanks to all county board members and in particular to our nine county chairmen. It is the county chairmen who lead in Ulster, they take decisions and they defend our official guide, I thank them all for their outstanding leadership.

I have deliberately not focussed today on competitions and games issues, they are in our convention booklet but I should state and state clearly; our gaelic games are central to everything we do, all games and I stress again to all of you that our games are the main focus for us as a sporting body and hurling, camogie, rounders, handball and football are all equal partners in our clubs.

Finally, tomorrow Ulster play Munster in the inter provincial or railway cup final in Morgan Athletic Grounds. Ulster has consistently supported this competition as we do indeed feel a sense of belonging to Ulster. In darker days the solidarity of a nine county province was a strength and we should not forget that. I hope you don't say that you support the railway cup and then stay at home. This competition needs to be preserved and it needs to be grown. We in the GAA in Ulster will steadfastly support the inter provincial, I thank the Ulster counties for supporting its retention last year when there were moves to abolish it. We succeeded in holding on to it, now let's attend it. But for now Ulster need to win tomorrow and I hope you will all be there to watch the finest sporting talent in Ireland.

Thank you for all the fantastic work for Comhairle Uladh, Cumann Lúthchleas Gael. Together we are stronger. Clubs and counties need to constantly refresh our Gaelic vision and crucially we need to know who runs this association and support our democratically elected leadership at club, county, provincial and national level.

Míle buíochas as bhur dtacaíocht is comhoibriú i rith na bliana. Táim ag súil go mór leis an bhliain atá le teacht agus táim cinnte go rachaidh Cumann Lúthchleas Gael ó neart go neart sa chúige is sa tír. Go raibh maith agaibh go léir agus go mbeirimid go léir be ar an am seo arís.

Beir Bua,

Aogán O Fearghail.

Uachtarán Chomhairle Uladh CLG.

25 Feabhra 2012.