

Billy Lawless
Former Senator for the Diaspora
Opening Address
Citizenship, Emigrants & Voting Rights Post Brexit
March 1, 2021

Thank you, Liam. I am Billy Lawless, born and raised in Galway. I emigrated to Chicago in 1998, started a successful restaurant business with my family, and am now an American citizen. My proudest day was finally being able to walk into a voting booth and cast my first vote for a U.S. President. I also took up the cause of undocumented Irish immigrants and had the great privilege of introducing President Obama in 2014 when he introduced his DACA executive order, to protect the undocumented who had been brought to America as children.

Five years ago, I co-founded votingrights.ie with Noreen Bowden and Kevin Sullivan; Irish Americans and Irish citizens who have spent years supporting Ireland. Noreen is a well-established expert on the Irish diaspora, and has been an advocate for emigrant voting rights for 15 years. Kevin is the director of this conference along with Liam Kennedy and for the last two years he has also been the Project Director for the Ad Hoc Committee to Protect the Good Friday Agreement; a key group of American political leaders and diplomats, who have spent decades supporting the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Their work in Washington D.C. has been vital in helping to persuade the Congress and President Biden to protect the Good Friday Agreement and prevent a hard Border. I am honored to be a member of the Ad Hoc Committee. In 2016 Taoiseach Enda Kenny appointed me the first Irish Senator to represent the Diaspora. I have every hope that this unique position will continue in the Seanad, and in the future it will no longer be unique.

I am here this morning to explain the significant reasons for this conference, and our campaign to ensure that all Irish citizens including Irish emigrants and citizens living in Northern Ireland, should be able to vote in future Presidential elections including the next one in 2025. I would also like to introduce you to the Citizenship Papers, a series of essays by academics, political leaders, activists and young emigrants making the case for expanding the franchise; to cherish all of the children of the Nation equally.

This conference has several clear purposes. We wish to explore the very concept of citizenship – because Ireland is in the midst of profound change. Brexit has created new conversations about the future of Ireland, and the unfolding speed of these conversations is quite astonishing. Are we a shared Ireland? Who gets to decide?

We believe that there is a great imbalance in the relationship between the Irish State and its emigrant community. We are seen as a resource. We are Ireland's soft power. And yet we remain shutout of the political process. Is there an emigrant sitting today in the Irish Dail or Irish Seanad? No. There is not.

For centuries Irish emigrants have kept faith with Ireland, but has Ireland kept faith with them? That is the question we ask today. They were often forced into economic exile and then politically disenfranchised. Over 240,000 Irish citizens emigrated as a result of the Great Recession and while a great number are coming home every week, many more are still overseas.

And let us remember this: for 100 years Irish citizens in the North were abandoned when it came to voting rights. Mary McAleese living in Belfast could successfully campaign for the presidency in 1997, but neither she nor her husband Martin could vote in the election. That was 24 years ago and nothing has changed except for the fact that there are now over 830,000 Irish passport holders living just over the Border. When will their votes be counted?

Yes, it is quite true that many of these new passport holders may have acquired citizenship to protect their EU rights, and you would do the same if you were in their shoes as well. And yes surely there are many who have become citizens, just to avoid the expense and paperwork of securing visas for their summer holidays.

But it is also equally true that there are hundreds of thousands of Irish citizens living just over the Border like our very own Emma De Souza, who waged a successful five year fight, against the Home Office to protect her Irish identity. Emma lives just five miles from the Border. We must end this outdated parochial thinking; these geographical boundaries, that make no sense.

One of the themes we will hear in Emma's "Northern Voices" discussion is the absolute importance of the citizenship provisions of the Good Friday Agreement; that you can be Irish,

British or both. This broad definition of citizenship has kept the peace for over 20 years and may keep the peace in the momentous years ahead.

We also worry that there is a growing case of “historical amnesia” when it comes to what emigrants have done for the Irish State and society. So let us remember a few key facts. Thomas Clarke, the father of the revolution and the first signer of the Proclamation, was a returned Irish emigrant and an American citizen. His American passport lies in a place of honor in our National Museum.

James Connolly was also a returned Irish emigrant. Emigrants were in the vanguard in the fight on Easter Week, including the 90 men from the Kimmage Garrison. American emigrants financed the Free State in its early years; there was a reason De Valera spent 18 months in America selling Free State Bonds.

And for decades emigrants in America and in Great Britain faithfully sent home their remittances. Historians estimate over 11 billion Euro in today’s money was sent home by nurses, maids, construction workers; every day working class people trying to make their way in a new land. We have an essay in the Citizenship Papers laying out these clear facts.

When the Great Recession hammered our economy and forced hundreds of thousands of young Irish men and women to emigrate, where did Ireland turn to? It looked to Foreign Direct Investment seeking the help of business and political leaders in America and elsewhere. Ireland would go on to organize four Global Irish Economic Forums, to encourage business leaders from the diaspora, to invest in Ireland and jump-start the economy; and two Global Civic Forums were created to enlist the many civic leaders of the wider diaspora. Ireland called and the diaspora answered, as they always have.

When Covid 19 filled up our hospitals last year the then Minister for Health Simon Harris, put out a “Your country needs you” call, and hundreds of doctors and nurses came home to help from the UK, Australia and the US. (1) When Ireland calls we have always responded, but this is the question we ask today – has Ireland kept faith with us?

Let us see where we are. In recent years the government has started to respond to the concerns of Irish men and women living overseas, many of whom intend to return home. Jimmy

Deenihan became our nation's first Minister for the Diaspora followed by Joe McHugh and Ciaran Cannon T.D. The DFA has made a substantial effort to expand the Emigrant Support Programme and our Taoiseach Micheal Martin has supported this increase. We now have an established Diaspora Policy that is regularly updated which Minister Brophy will discuss later in the program.

Our current Minister of Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney, has always been a great champion of giving emigrants the vote, and creating a more inclusive Ireland and we thank him for his kind words this morning. And just this year the government has created a new position – a Minister for Election Reform; a position now held by Malcom Noonan, T.D. who will join us later in the proceedings. We are very pleased that the Government has, at long last, recognized the need for substantial reform of our elections laws. This is a step in the right direction.

So Yes - the government is listening and starting to engage and we are very pleased that this government has committed to holding a national referendum, which would allow all Irish citizens including emigrants to vote in future Presidential elections.

Ireland is very proud of its ability to punch above its weight. We rank # 1 in the world when it comes to inward foreign investment. We are a land of great poets and Irish stars dominate in Hollywood. Our diplomats are nimble, smart and world class. There is a reason the European Union had Ireland's back during these four years negotiating Brexit. Unfortunately, when it comes to voting rights for emigrants we don't punch at all; we're still trying to figure out how to put on the gloves.

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According to the most recent International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance global report, which just came out in January "125 states and territories allow people living abroad to participate in legislative elections, 88 allow participation in presidential elections" and "73 countries and territories allow citizens overseas to participate in referendums." Ireland is not one of them.

Ireland likes to consider itself as a global leader supporting democracy and human rights. Yet one of our essay writers, Martin Flaherty, a distinguished human rights expert, describes Ireland as a "parochial backwater" that stands apart from "modern political democracy" and "evolving human rights law." As a nation we are very far behind the rest of the world's democracies and

out of step with the core E.U. principle regarding freedom of movement, living abroad should not preclude you from voting in your home country.

In 2013 our Constitutional Convention voted 78% in favor of giving citizens living outside the State, including Northern Ireland, the right to vote in Presidential elections; that was eight years ago. Why is the pace of reform so slow, and why is there a hesitation in the government's full embrace of the Irish emigrant community?

In an essay in the Citizenship Papers Prof. Liam Kennedy writes and I quote, "Ireland's evolving diaspora policy has by and large, sidestepped issues of enfranchisement while talking up "engagement", "pluralism" and "inclusion". In the diaspora policy document the "role of government" vis-à-vis the diaspora is said to "support", "connect", "facilitate" and "recognise" – all relatively passive terms, common in the policy discourse of many governments, as they seek to "engage" without being seen to direct state-diaspora relations."

What we seek is a new vocabulary, an active vocabulary with honest words that have substance behind them that reflect our democratic values, and a commitment to full participation in shaping the policies that impact our nation's emigrants, the vote.

We also wish to explore this great inertia; this inability to move forward when it comes to election reform and creating a modern inclusive democracy. Why is there no movement in reforming the Irish Seanad, despite numerous studies, reports, and the work of my good friend Senator Michael McDowell. who I had the privilege to serve with these last four years, when I was the Senator for the Diaspora.

In the last two referendums a small but energetic number of emigrants, voted in the #Home toVote campaign and it was incredibly inspirational to see them come home. But the vast majority of Irish emigrants overseas can't take the day off to get on a plane, to come home to vote, and so few are entitled to. We are denied the vote and a voice. And who represents the hundreds of thousands of Irish citizens living just over the Border?

Yet, just yesterday Larry McCarthy from Cork, an emigrant living in New Jersey, became the 40th President of the GAA, one of the great institutions of Irish Society: the first overseas candidate in the GAA's 136-year history to win the presidency. Surely if the GAA can adapt and change, and recognize the strength of its global Irish community, why can't the Irish State?

We also wish to explore another theme - "the hierarchy of Irishness" a seeming litmus test based on geography which defines who has voting rights. The law is very clear – if you leave Ireland and do not intend to return in 18 months your name can be struck from the voting rolls. And if you live on the other side of the Border in Derry City, or Belfast you have no vote at all - just like Emma DeSouza who lives just 5 miles from the Border in Fermanagh.

The Irish State has imposed clear and definitive geographical and time limit restrictions on our right to vote. These regulations reflect an outdated world view about emigrants' work and life. There are close to 100,000 Irish-born citizens living in the greater London area; London is, in many ways, a larger Irish city than Limerick, Waterford and my home town of Galway.

I am sure the London Irish think they are as Irish as we are. They have numerous well established GAA clubs; they watch RTE and they come home often. Yet they have no vote. Somehow they are a little less Irish because they are in London, just over an hour away by Aer Lingus or Ryan Air. Now imagine the Irish in Canada, the United States, the Gulf States – all 20,000 of them, and the Irish in Australia. Are they less Irish? We believe you are Irish where ever you are. To paraphrase Seamus Heany, whether here or there, their passports are green.

Then there are those who say emigrants should pay a tax for the privilege of voting for our first citizen; they forget that millions of emigrants taxed themselves for decades, by sending home their remittances, and many emigrants still pay taxes in some form. These naysayers rally around slogans " No Representation without Taxation" which tells me that they know nothing about the American Constitution and 24th Amendment which eliminated the poll tax used to keep Black Americans from voting. Our patience is really taxed beyond belief.

And then there is the faulty assumption that emigrants can't be trusted with the vote for the next President of the global Irish nation. We're here in Ireland, we know better, they don't know Irish politics like we do. Not true.

Finally it is very important to stick to the facts. While Ireland has an enormous diaspora only a very small number are actually Irish passport holders and citizens with the right to vote. The vast majority of Irish Americans, for example, will not be able to vote for the simple reason that their families came over during the Famine years. And I suspect that they are happy enough to vote for a great Irish American President Joe Biden who has made the expansion and protecting of voting rights, one his top legislative priorities this year (3)

We take our inspiration from the great American civil rights leader John Lewis who put voting rights at the very heart of the American civil rights movement. John was famous for encouraging young people to get involved "[When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something.](#)" So we follow in that tradition just as civil rights marchers in Northern Ireland in the 1960's, were inspired by American civil rights marchers like John Lewis.

Some will say this is no time to start talking about voting rights and election reform, we have our hands full with COVID 19. If we follow that advice nothing will happen, and the great inertia that has continually bogged down the spirit of reform will only grow. This conference is all about speaking out, doing something about it, and Ireland will be stronger for it as a result.

The fact of the matter is that the people of the world are increasingly moving and migrating, and that will only increase because of Climate Change. This century will likely be known by historians as the Great Migration, as millions of people around the world seek safety, shelter and prosperity. (4)

Right now close to 17% of the people residing in the Republic are immigrants including thousands of doctors, nurses and health workers on the front line, fighting the pandemic. (5) Will we now deny them citizenship after they have saved our lives? Sorcha Pollak's essay in the Citizenship Papers offers you a significant perspective on this very immediate issue.

Our concern is simply this - the language of the Constitution is expansive and inclusive and embraces all Irish citizens but the State's policies are often outdated and restrictive and in opposition to the core principle of the E.U regarding freedom of movement, and the right to vote in your own home country. We can't cherry pick E.U. policy.

This is why we call the on the government to launch a new Citizen's Assembly on voting rights and election reform. This is one of the great democratic reforms of the last decade that allows citizens to make informed decisions, about how to advance voting rights and create a modern 21st century democracy.

Our great hope is that as the clouds of this COVID pandemic recedes, a sunburst of democracy will shine across this land, and this generation will follow in the tradition of the Great Liberator

and the Founders of the Republic, to create a more inclusive and democratic Republic; a modern democracy fit for the 21st century.

When we have completed this conference, we look forward to sending a clear set of recommendations to the Taoiseach and the Tanaiste and the appropriate Ministers. The next ten years will be momentous times for Ireland, and if we are to be a shared Ireland, that our voices must be heard. We have much to offer and contribute and we are very pleased that the Irish people are with us, based on new poll numbers that were just released.

We have also assembled the Citizenship Papers, essays written by distinguished academics, political leaders, young emigrants and global leaders from around the world. These essays cover a wide range of subjects around citizenship and voting. You can read them at CitizenshipPapers.ie.

We have essays full of great passion from emigrants explaining why they want to vote. A lovely essay from the former Minister of the Diaspora Ciaran Cannon about his experience meeting GAA club members in Connecticut, and reflecting on their right to citizenship. We also have an essay written by Cathaoirleach of Seanad Eireann Senator Mark Daly, a long time champion of emigrant voting rights.

Of all the essays, one of the most moving is from Kathleen O'Sullivan from Blackrock in Cork, the mother of Morgan O'Sullivan who now lives in Florida with his American wife and the three grandchildren. Kathleen writes,

"I know he had to go. I know it was better for him. But I wish he was here. There are times when I am at family events, and I almost zone out thinking there is one person missing from the dinner table. Whether it is a birthday or communion or christening or Christmas, there are so many he has missed out on. The phone and the advent of FaceTime and such have made it easier. Yet I still feel crushed that he is so far away. He may have left Ireland, but Ireland has never left him, and knowing my son, it never will. His voice deserves to be heard."

I believe Kathleen speaks for every Irish mother who has children far away.

Today we will hear from many voices explaining our cause and to start the process we have asked the distinguished pollster Kevin Cunningham from Ireland Thinks to share his thoughts on a new poll that was released yesterday. But before we do I am very pleased to introduce a video from our distinguished Minister for Foreign Relations Simon Coveney; a great friend of the Irish overseas. Thank you.

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Endnotes:

1. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/doctors-returning-to-fight-covid-19-feel-betrayed-says-imo-1.4283771>
2. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/out-country-voting> page 15
3. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/congress-must-pass-people-act>
4. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/>
5. <https://www.thejournal.ie/immigrants-employment-education-ireland-esri-4325207-Nov2018/>

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/doctors-returning-to-fight-covid-19-feel-betrayed-says-imo-1.4283771>

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/oncall/>

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/28/turnout-soared-in-2020-as-nearly-two-thirds-of-eligible-u-s-voters-cast-ballots-for-president/>