

Comhairle Uladh C.L.G.
Oráid An Uachtaráin
Comhdháil Bliantúil 23ú Feabhra 2008

A Cháirde Gael,

Ar dtús, fáilte mhór do achan duine go dtí An Iúir, inniu, go Comhdháil Bliantúil Comhairle Uladh C.L.G. Mo bhúiochas do gach duine uilig as ucht an obair iontach a rinn sibh ar son Cumann Lúthchleas Gael í gCúige Uladh sa bhliain seo caite. Mo bhúiochas speisialta do hoifigí agus baill an Chomhairle agus don Runaí Dónal O'Murchú agus a lucht oibre.

It is my pleasure to welcome all of you here today to County Down, a county steeped in the history of Cumann Lúthchleas Gael, for our 2008 Ulster Convention. At the outset I pay tribute to all involved – Down County Board, Newry Shamrocks, and Club Down – on the magnificent refurbishment of Park Esler which was officially opened last summer and which provides this proud county with a modern facility which matches its standing in our Association.

Our Convention Booklet for 2008, in addition to the extensive report from our Runaí Cúige and the various Committees of the Council, includes for the first time, commencing on page 69, detailed senior staff reports on the Coaching and Games Development Programmes and an Operational Report on the broad range of other activities undertaken by the Council during the year. Taken together, all of these reports capture impressively the depth and breath of GAA activity in Ulster currently and puts in context our objectives and plans on the one hand, and our achievements on the other. The many and varied challenges which we must continue to meet are also well addressed. All of this represents extensive human endeavour, for the most part undertaken by a countless number of dedicated voluntary workers, who believe in the aims and objectives of Cumann Lúthchleas Gael, supported by a confident and skilled team of dedicated staff members led by an exceptional Secretary/Director in the persona of Donal O'Murchú at Provincial level and an increasing number of staff at County level. In this address I hope to touch on some areas of the Administration of

our Association both within the Province and nationally. In deference to my listening audience I will not attempt to comprehensively deal with the very broad range, almost unending, list of issues and challenges that face an organisation like ours on a daily basis.

On the playing fields, 2007 again reflected the continuing strength of Gaelic games in Ulster, particularly Gaelic football with Donegal historically winning their first National Football League title, Ulster winning a record 28th Inter-Provincial title, and club teams from Ulster featuring in all three All Ireland Club Football finals with Crossmaglen winning their fourth All Ireland title, Greencastle (Co. Tir Eoghain) taking the All Ireland Junior Football Championship crown and Eoghain Rua (Co Doire) missing out by the narrowest of margins on an All Ireland Intermediate Club Football Championship title. In 2008 The Rock (Co. Tir Eoghain) were worthy of their place in the All Ireland Junior Club Final last week where they found it hard to get going against Ceanmhuí (Corcaigh). We wish Crossmaglen the very best in their All Ireland semi-final tomorrow against St. Vincents (Ath Cliath). The fantastic work undertaken in the second level schools throughout Ulster was rewarded in a very fitting way with the Tyrone Vocational Schools Team coming through as All Ireland winners of the Paul McGirr Cup, Omagh CBS winning the Hogan Cup, Virginia Vocational School, Co. Cavan taking the All Ireland Under 18 Vocational Schools title and St. Columbans High School, Killeel, Co. Down winning the Under 16 Vocational Schools title at All Ireland level. The success of Queens University in winning the Sigerson Cup and the Ryan Cup speaks volumes for the work being done at Third/University level in the Province, particularly given the fact that we had an all-Ulster Sigerson Cup final with the involvement of University of Ulster, Jordanstown. A highly competitive Ulster senior football championship saw Tyrone adding to their title count and having to overcome a resurgent Monaghan team who in many ways were the story of the Championship in 2007. Armagh added a further Ulster under 21 Championship to their record of achievement at this level whilst Tyrone doubled up with the Ulster minor football championship against a very accomplished Derry minor team, who having earlier won the Ulster minor football league, overcame their defeat in the Ulster final to produce several memorable displays before being ultimately and rather unluckily beaten in the All Ireland final.

The recently completed Dr. McKenna Cup saw an ambitious Down team win their first title since the re-emergence of this competition in 2003. The co-operation and collaborative approach of all of the counties and the Third Level/University teams involved in this competition has to be acknowledged as we succeeded, in the month of January, in running 21 matches in a little over a three-week period. The initiative taken by the Council in relation to the floodlighting programme over recent years really came into its own and this competition was greatly enhanced by the involvement of Gaelic Life as competition sponsors, live coverage of some of the games including the final by TG4, and musical entertainment.

On the Hurling front very definite highlights were the historic success of the Antrim senior hurlers in winning the Walsh Cup in a great final against Offaly played in Casement Park through the good offices of the Leinster Council and the success of an accomplished young Derry under 21 hurling team in defeating Antrim in the Provincial championship final. The participation of Armagh in both senior and minor hurling championships was a welcome development and their progress culminated in their appearance in the Nicky Rackard Final. After a number of rather one-sided Ulster minor hurling championship finals in recent years it was refreshing to see a competitive final in 2007 where Antrim eventually had a 3 point success over Down. Clooney Gales (Antrim) gave a very good account of themselves in the All Ireland Junior Championship final before eventually going down to Danesfort, (Kilkenny) whilst Ruairi Óg of Cushandall did not make it easy for Loughrea in the All Ireland senior club semi-final. Recently, Ulster Intermediate Hurling Champions Keady Lámh Dearg were defeated at the semi-final stage and Glen Rovers (Armoyle), having progressed through the Quarter Final, were defeated in the All Ireland Junior Championship semi-final. Tomorrow, an experienced Dunloy Senior Hurling Team take on Birr (Offaly) in the All Ireland semi-final in Clones where we wish them well.

The year past was the first full year working with the new Disciplinary Process at Provincial level and I wish to acknowledge the contribution made by Sean McCague (Chairman) and Eamon McMahon (Secretary) together with the members of our Development Committee who functioned as the Provincial Hearings Committee and carried out their duties in an exemplary fashion. This is a hugely time consuming and

complex area of GAA administration and we are really fortunate to have available to us such experienced personnel to undertake these functions. The recent approval by Ard Comhairle of the formation by three of our provincial counties (Cavan, Fermanagh and Monaghan) of a single Hearings Committee to deal with hearings in those counties is an interesting and innovative development. When and if this process begins to function it is a mechanism which other Ulster counties may wish to evaluate as it looks like a very practical option for pooling voluntary resources and reducing duplication of work between counties.

The Ulster Council C.L.G., working as it does across two Legislative Jurisdictions, with different currencies, legal frameworks and Local Authority/Government arrangements faces challenges and pressures with a resultant increased workload, not faced by other GAA units. Our current Strategic Plan, Beir Bua Nua, is the principal template for our development work and to achieve the objectives set out in that Strategy requires extensive consultation, collaboration and working with a whole range of Agencies. As much of this activity is well captured in the various Operational Reports put before Convention today I will refer only briefly to a number of issues that have arisen from all of these processes. In this Jurisdiction the pressure on sports funding available from exchequer sources arising from the investment in the 2012 Olympics in London will hamper the level of exchequer funding available for Sports Programmes including capital development. From the point of view of this Council, great care has to be taken to ensure that we deliver on the objectives required of us under the various Programmes in order to protect core funding into the future. At this stage, it looks as if we will achieve a measure of continuing support but this is a matter we cannot be complacent on. I believe our initiative in making direct approaches to each of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal County Councils with a view to achieving revenue support from those Authorities in respect of Coaching Programmes in each of those counties over the next three years was extremely positive and has met with a most encouraging reaction, although all of the arrangements are not yet finalised. In the Six Counties, we continue to develop our working relationship with the District Councils. The very successful working relationship developed by Derry County Board and this Council with Derry City Council will hopefully serve as a model for working with Belfast City Council in the future when the current project on the development of a Strategy for the GAA in Belfast is completed. I see this as a hugely important and significant piece of work as the greater Belfast area

encompasses two County Board administrations and upwards of 30 Clubs. There are many challenges both in terms of providing new facilities, upgrading existing facilities, and promoting our games in a broad and inclusive way including in areas where there is significant social disadvantage and where we as an Association can do more by way of contributing to community development.

Hurling activity in the Province is dealt with comprehensively in the report from our Runaí and in the Operational Reports. There is extensive activity taking place on the development front and considerable additional resources have been put in over recent years. I am keen to see this level of development work sustained and increased. In the first half of this year a new Strategy for Hurling Development in the Province will be published. In this context, it is vital that we work to develop within Ulster a common agreed approach to the structure for inter-county competitions at all grades and articulate this coherently at National level. The very significant role now played by this Council in providing inter-club hurling fixtures in the adult grades can be further extended, particularly to address the real issue of weak competition for under-age club teams. All of this will require full co-operation and sensible working arrangements between the Council and the counties, particularly in the area of fixtures.

On the matter of infrastructure, by the end of this current year eight of our counties will have stadia, floodlit to TV standard and in several instances, completely new sand-based playing fields. The flexibility these new modern facilities provide to delivering our games programme is immeasurable and has already been seen to good effect. In the past week, agreement has been reached on the process to move forward with a state-of-the-art floodlighting scheme for Clones, led by Monaghan County Board and with the involvement of the local club and of this Council in terms of providing technical support and project management. When completed, this particular aspect of development of the premier County and Provincial grounds will represent a significant statement of our confidence in the future of the games in Ulster and will serve us well into the future. In the last quarter of 2007, considerable time and effort was invested in putting together a major multi million euro bid, as part of the Strategic Investment Programme of Ard Comhairle, to the National Infrastructure Committee, for central funding to support new playing facilities throughout the

province of Ulster over the next three years. This Programme will have a key emphasis on Third Generation floodlit pitches (often referred to as “Astro-turf”). Strategically, I believe we have never done well enough by our schools, colleges and third level/university sectors in terms of supporting them with easily accessible facilities, particularly in the winter time. Of course many clubs go beyond the call of duty to take winter games, but this co-operation is not universal. Following a meeting with the County Chairmen in the Autumn of 2007, when the approach to a new Infrastructural Programme was agreed in overall terms, I had the opportunity with my colleague Provincial Presidents to put forward the Ulster case in early December 2007. While we await an overall decision on the complete programme put forward it is clear now, that by the end of this current year, the first phase of work will see at least three full sized third generation floodlit facilities completed or nearing completion in Ulster at strategic locations, with more coming on stream in 2009 and 2010. These facilities will be capable of taking full competitive games in both hurling and football. I take the opportunity to highlight that the GAA must be pro-active in insisting that where public funds are being invested in third generation pitches in this Province, the minimum acceptable pitch size for multi sports facilities must be 130m x 80m. This is an important issue for us as at this point in time, despite all of the public community and schools investment in facilities of this type in Ulster we do have not a single site where we can play Gaelic games competitively. There are other dimensions to our infrastructural bid which in particular seeks to broaden out the provision of floodlit facilities to the more peripheral areas of the Province, removed as they are from existing or planned central facilities such as main county grounds and/or Centres of Excellence. While much work remains to be done I am confident that this Programme, if we maintain our strategic focus and an energetic and collaborative approach will give an enormous boost to the completion of fixtures programmes. It will also provide the prospect of additional fixtures for clubs on a cross county basis, particularly where there are weak competition structures currently, such as in underage hurling where teams at Under 18 and Under 16 level in very many instances are simply not getting enough games.

Armagh has proven to be an excellent administrative location for Comhairle Uladh and is historically significant. During 2007 we reaffirmed our commitment to maintain our head office here but have begun the search for a new location where we

could combine our office and meeting room requirements with an All-Weather GAA pitch and ancillary facilities to provide a Provincial Centre of Excellence for coaching and games development. Discussions with a number of parties locally have taken place. We hope to move this forward to the decision stage over the next 4-6 months. It will take a few years to achieve. Of historical significance was the handover to the Archive of Comhairle Uladh at the Cardinal O'Fiach Library in Armagh of the bound volumes of Comhairle Uladh minutes and other records going back to the establishment of the Council. This is a historical GAA archive which will now be managed and maintained in a proper environment and made available to researchers in a controlled way.

With regard to the Irish language, in my acceptance address to Convention last year, I referred to the then impending Irish Language Act and the significance of that legislation in terms of sustaining and promoting our culture. At our Community Development Conference in the Stormont Hotel in October of last year, the Minister for Culture, Arts & Leisure, Edwin Poots, MLA, explained his rationale as Minister for not proceeding with the legislation. While it was refreshing to have a Minister of Mr. Poots' political background put forward his rationale in an open way to an audience of over 400 GAA people, the fact remains that our Association in this Province strongly articulates that this legislation should be brought forward and that the Irish language should be put on a statutory footing similar to what has happened elsewhere in this country for Gaelic and in neighbouring countries for other languages. We put our views on this matter forthrightly to Minister Poots when he visited our office in Armagh last Autumn and I do so again today at our Provincial Convention. The Irish language means a lot to GAA people here and the sense of annoyance and frustration building up on this matter should not be underestimated.

With regard to the media, I want to warmly welcome the level of media interest in our games in the Province of Ulster. The level of games coverage in some of our newspapers here is as comprehensive as we could ever expect and extends, as it should, way beyond activity in this Province. The media challenges that exist also have to be aired. I welcome the re-introduction by BBC Radio Ulster of the three hour programme covering Gaelic games on a Sunday. We all know the background to this and the annoyance caused by the absence of coverage, particularly of the Ulster

Club Championships. When media organisations respond to our concerns we must recognise that. Given the quality and capacity of the GAA journalists available to BBC Radio Ulster I believe that Organisation must now take the next step and find a substantial weekend slot on mainstream radio i.e. the FM band as distinct from Medium Wave, which its Sunday programmes currently operates on. For games such as ours that are so popular to the residential population it should not be necessary to “opt out” and switch to another channel as this completely negates the value of the coverage in bringing news of our games and a sense of our Organisation to the wider community including the substantial part of the community in Ulster that are not traditional GAA followers. I very much welcome the fact that our voice has been clearly heard at national level in our own Association in relation to the new TV contracts which will see Ulster Championship games agreed for live TV shown on both RTE and BBC. At this point in time, all eight Ulster Championship games in 2008 are included. This will give a significant boost to the promotion of our games in Ulster. It is also significant that in issuing the tender for international/digital TV rights a caveat will be included to protect the availability to a carrier in Ulster of live TV games after the completion of the Ulster championship. Intensive discussions have taken place in relation to this matter over the past 20 weeks or so and I want to recognise that the President of our Association, Nickey Brennan, has carefully listened to the case that we have made from Ulster on this matter and has been committed to achieving a solution which should change the status quo as it has existed for several years now. I noted his overall commitment to supporting GAA events in Ulster over the past year has been exceptional. While the matter of TV rights and Contracts is a complex area an objective must be to ensure that **all** of our televised games can be viewed anywhere in Ireland on a “free to air” basis. Yes, progress has been made but this is an area that we have further work to do on and that we must manage in a dynamic way over the next few years as the move is made to replace analogue with digital transmission.

An outcome of the recent Special Congress is a new responsibility on Provincial Councils to approve the Championship Programme within its constituent Counties and to monitor its progress. Linked with this, is the requirement to organise an Annual Seminar for counties on the subject of effective fixture making. The existing CCC of Comhairle Uladh will take responsibility for the Club Championship approval

and monitoring functions, and in late September/early October of this year Comhairle Uladh will organise a seminar at which the complete 2009 inter-county and cross-county fixtures programme under our control and available from national level will be outlined. A specific objective will be to minimise clashes between provincial and internal county competitions and in this regard we ask County Boards to hold on finalising their individual fixtures programmes until after the Seminar takes place. The intention is to attempt a collaborative approach to streamline fixtures. We know it will be a very difficult task and that full streamlining is unlikely to be achieved but with a will to improve on the existing situation there should be at least some added value from this process.

At International level, Ulster Council C.L.G is twinned for development purposes with Canada and with Britain, for hurling. With regard to Canada, our support is in the main provided through assisting with coaching and games development and referee training – the distances involved determines that a “training the trainers” type of approach is what works best and best meets the needs of the small number of units in that country and it is of practical help to them. In the case of Britain, Comhairle Uladh, through our Runaí, were part of the new Strategy for the development of the GAA in Britain which was launched in 2007 and delivered under the leadership of Cristóir O Cúana, Corcaigh. We have a good practical working relationship with the GAA in Britain and the new strategy outlines many areas where our assistance will be sought with specific actions. Because of our experience in working with and within a legislative system similar to that which exists for the GAA in Britain, this is work which we should willingly engage in and bring a new level of energy to. The participation of Comhairle Uladh in the Smithsonian Festival in Washington in July 2007 provided an opportunity for people from all traditions and backgrounds from Ulster, who were part of the Festival, to see at first hand the breath of the GAA’s involvement in community life here, particularly through our 580 Clubs. The responses from the thousands of visitors to our Exhibit, people from all over the world but with substantial numbers from the United States, demonstrated at first hand the potential audience there is for Gaelic games if we as an Association put in place contractual arrangements for international TV rights that have the promotion of our games and culture as the primary objective. The strengthening of the relationship between this Council and the Shinty Association in Scotland, an organisation with a

base now of only 50 Clubs, is an important dimension of our activities, as the Celtic origins of both hurling and shinty provide a backdrop against which both organisations can work together for mutual benefit. The attendance of 10 representatives of the Shinty Association in Scotland at our coaching conference recently is a further example of a good and developing working relationship.

Over the next two weeks or so Clubs and County Boards will have the opportunity in advance of the Central Council meeting on March 17th, to discuss and consider the proposed arrangements for the re-establishment of the Compromise Rules Series between Ireland and Australia to mark the 150th anniversary of the AFL in 2008. There should be a full debate within the Association on this matter as the player safety and disciplinary issues which arose from the last Series of games in 2006 are still fresh in the minds of GAA people everywhere and remain a matter of huge concern. The proposed changes to the disciplinary code and organisational arrangements may address some of the specific issues that have arisen in the past. What really has to be discussed is – what is the relevance of this Series to a modern GAA? A GAA which has its own extensive international network of clubs dispersed now throughout the world, including in Australia, where there seems to be little or no benefit accruing to the domestic GAA organisation there from this experiment. Chief among the concerns within our Association is the aggressive targeting and recruitment of young GAA players by the Australian Rules Clubs who have affiliated apparently to commercial agents in Ireland. This aspect, although frustrating, should be kept in perspective as some young people will always choose to transfer between sports – it is our job to organise and positively promote our amateur games in a way that will retain them and would entice them back. As an Association we must continue to have the confidence to at all times focus on our primary job – the promotion of Gaelic games in their truest form and all aspects of our culture both within our own country and abroad. We certainly do not need diversions from that task as we face more than enough complexities in doing our own business.

In 2007 the Association was thrust into the spotlight in relation to the incident in Fermanagh involving Darren Graham. This was a difficult time for Darren and his family, for his own Club and indeed neighbouring Clubs who were drawn into the matter. Fermanagh County Board, the Clubs immediately involved and the GAA

throughout the County aswell as Darren and his family have to be commended for bringing this local matter to a very positive outcome, with Darren returning to play. However, the implications of this matter went far beyond local level, but another positive outcome was the opportunity for the GAA to highlight its clear position under Rule as a Non-Sectarian Organisation. This was done effectively at all levels of the Association.

The long drawn out process in relation to provision of a multi-sports stadium at the Long Kesh site reached a further stage in 2007 when the three Sports Bodies involved committed to the project. This is not and never has been a GAA Project, nor was it an approach advocated by the GAA; our experience has been that our aims and objectives as a multi-sports and cultural organisation in our own right have best been met by providing our own facilities. The GAA was invited to get involved in this Project in the positive context of building a Shared Future. It is in that spirit that our involvement in this proposed Project from the outset must be seen. The process was managed by the Strategic Investment Board who dealt directly with the Sports Bodies and whose job it was to bring the overall proposed scheme to the next stage. Elements of the process, which of itself was long drawn out, included consideration of possible locations and the development of a Business Case. Our understanding always was that if all three Sports Bodies were satisfied with the Framework for moving forward, the matter of proceeding with the Project, it's financing and its delivery would be taken forward at governmental level. That is how the matter now stands, and as an Association we have made our position very clear, have fully co-operated with all of the processes involved **but we have no wish to be involved in whatever political processes must apply from here out.** We have made our decisions and have been forthright in relation to them, it is now for others to make their decision. This Project is either going to happen or it is not and the sooner we know, the better.

Over recent months the matter of the player award scheme has been a controversial and a hotly debated subject in this Province and is for debate at Congress and is the subject of a DRA process. Irrespective of outcomes, our Association must take from all of this a number of lessons. Firstly, the arrangements for exchequer funding of any element of our Association should be the subject of direct negotiations between

the GAA as a Governing Body and Government only. Secondly, at every level of the Association the matter of compliance with rule 11 has to be considered and none more so than at grass roots level. There are simple, easy to implement voluntary initiatives that can be put in place to improve compliance and accountability in relation to Rule 11, if the will exists to do it. We are making a start here today with our own declaration of compliance which has been circulated.

As is often the case with our Association its penetration at grass roots level is often best demonstrated when sad events occur in our communities. The tremendously supportive network which a GAA Club represents in its community was seen to exceptional effect on the two very sad occasions of the funerals in Co. Tyrone of the young boys Packie Breen and Patrick Devlin, who within an unbelievably short space of time of each other, died during participation in activities with their local Clubs. In Newbridge (Co. Doire) we saw the same response when Eamon Coleman, one of the great servants of Gaelic Football in Derry, Ulster and indeed further afield was laid to rest in a moving ceremony where there was something very special about the tribute paid to him by the presence of the entire Doire All Ireland winning 1993 team, complete with the Sam Maguire Cup carried by Henry Downey. Difficult as these occasions are, we always bring something away from them in terms of understanding how deeply rooted our Association is at community level. If nothing else this should rekindle our spirit of loyalty to the GAA and our respect for everybody involved in it, irrespective of their roles as players or administrators or very often as both.

Finally I want to extend sincere thanks to everybody who has contributed in the past 12 months to the dynamic and successful project that the GAA in Ulster, in all its dimensions, represents. At Provincial Council level thanks to all of the committee officers and members. As always the contribution made by Provincial Secretary Danny Murphy, who at a personal level had a very difficult start to 2007, has been extraordinary and way beyond the call of duty. We have an exceptionally well motivated and qualified team of staff working at all levels in the Province which is well represented by the reports put before you today; I want to thank them one and all for their contribution. Every one of them, apart from their employed position with the Association, are involved in many different voluntary ways in their own time, which speaks volumes for their commitment. On behalf of the Gaels of Ulster I wish to

again pay tribute to the outgoing Ard Stiurthoir, Liam O Maolmhichil who has contributed to the GAA at National level in an outstanding way over the past three decades. His period of office was coterminous with very difficult but also with changing times in this Province. In the most difficult of circumstances we could always depend on him for his support and I wish to publicly acknowledge that. His successor Pádraig O'Duáigh is someone whom we all know well, who has already given sterling service to the Association and in whose appointment as Ard Stiurthoir we as Ulster people take great pride. We would like to think that in the coming years he will have the full support of the GAA in Ulster in this important national leadership role. The year past saw the conclusion of Brian McEniff's term as Ulster football team manager and on behalf of the Council I extend our sincere thanks to him; coming as I do from the neighbouring Club to his I know at first hand the contribution that he has made to the GAA at all levels in a lifetime of involvement and we wish him well with all that he does in the future.

Today is a significant day for our Iar-Uachtarán Miceal Ó Grianáin who has committed 27 years of his life to the work of this Council, apart from his other extensive work for the Association. We sincerely thank him and wish him well. His links with the Council will continue through his Chairmanship of Coiste Scór and his many other supportive involvements. I also wish to acknowledge the contribution made to the Council over their years of involvement by Mick McGrath, Willie Turner and Chris Brown.

As we review our years work today we should look forward positively to the future. It is very clear to me that if we work together at County and Provincial level and that if we take an overall Strategic approach to achieving a set of agreed objectives over a particular time frame we will achieve high levels of success. This approach is so far working to the advantage of the GAA in Ulster – long may it continue – ní neart go chur le chéile.

Tomás O'Dálaigh
23ú Feabhra 2008