

OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN, GAILLIMH
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY

Text of the Introductory Address delivered by **MR LARRY DONNELLY**,
National University of Ireland, Galway on 12 June, 2015 on the occasion
of the Conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on
BILLY LAWLESS.

A Uachtaráin, a Sheánsailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine
uaisle.....

Billy Lawless, a native of Ragoon, was born in 1950, educated at the
“Jes” and worked on the family farm until 1977, when he entered the
hospitality trade. Many will associate him with the former Gallows Pub
on Prospect Hill and the still-booming Taaffes Pub on Shop Street. And
in 1982, he served as President of the Vintners Federation of Ireland.

At the same time, Billy Lawless was active in politics and eventually
became Chair of Fine Gael in the Galway West constituency. He stood
unsuccessfully for Galway City Council in 1991. Those who have failed
to win election to political office, yet subsequently went on to other –

maybe bigger and better – things, often wind up praising that resistant electorate for their “infinite wisdom.” Rather than dwell on what might have been in Irish politics, Billy Lawless would very likely echo this sentiment. But I don’t want to speak for him – “Billy Lawless TD” may still have an appealing ring to it!

He, his wife, Anne, and their family emigrated to the US during the 1990s and operated busy Irish pubs in Chicago before entering the restaurant business. He now owns highly regarded restaurants – the Gage and Acanto on Michigan Avenue in Chicago’s famous “Loop” among them – which employ more than 260 people and are now run by his children: John Paul, Amy, Clodagh and Billy. His hard work, dogged determination and consequent achievements are the embodiment of the ever difficult to realise “American Dream.”

Since Billy Lawless arrived in Chicago, he has been active in the Irish community and founded both the Chicago Irish Pub and Restaurant Association and the Chicago Celts for Immigration Reform. The latter venture led to his assuming a leadership role on the vexed issue of immigration in the US – both in Illinois and in Washington, DC.

His intervention came at a critical juncture both for the approximately 50,000 undocumented Irish men and women living in limbo and for Irish America, more generally. The future vibrancy of what is an undeniably remarkable entity – Irish America – is dependent on the continued flow of transatlantic migration. It is an eternal truism that a substantial number of Irish men and women will want to spend time living and working in the US. And history shows that the benefits ensuing to both countries are immeasurable. As such, and in a changed, post 9/11 setting, Irish America desperately needed champions to come forward. And there has been no finer champion of the cause of Irish America and of future generations of Irish people with an affinity for the United States than Billy Lawless.

He has worked incessantly and, as an Irishman, has played a pivotal part in getting *Democrats and Republicans* on Capitol Hill to look at immigration differently. Owing in no small way to Billy Lawless's indefatigable efforts and powers of persuasion, President Obama, his friend, issued an executive order late last year which, it is hoped, will improve the situation of thousands of undocumented immigrants in the US. The executive order was the first ray of light seen by the undocumented in a long time.

It is a significant step in the right direction. Recent setbacks in the courts, however, demonstrate that there is much more to do to ensure that undocumented men, women and children from all over the world can emerge from the shadows of America and that the US will remain a country of immigrants and of opportunity for all. The struggle to overcome a recalcitrant opposition must go on. Billy Lawless and his myriad allies across racial, ethnic and political party lines aren't done yet.

Before today, two of the many tributes – one in each of his two home cities – paid to Billy Lawless are worthy of mention. First, he was asked to introduce President Obama at a major rally in Chicago prior to an important address outlining the executive order on immigration reform last November. In that address, the President singled him out for praise:

Billy Lawless came “to Chicago, opens up an Irish pub – because there was a shortage of Irish pubs in Chicago. Then he opened another restaurant, then another, and then another. . .if you are willing to strike out, go to someplace new, build from scratch – you have that spirit, that's part of what the American spirit is all about.”

Second, he was made a Freeman of Galway just last month.

Lastly, he and Anne recently became American citizens. Partisanship may be inappropriate in the present context, but I am hopeful, and actually fairly certain, that the next thing they did was register to vote as Democrats!

Someone who has soldiered alongside Billy Lawless on the immigration issue – the influential Irish American journalist and long-time campaigner for the Irish in the US, Niall O’Dowd – put it very well:

“Billy Lawless is one of those unselfish Irishmen who refused to pull the ladder up after him after making it in America. Instead, he committed himself – heart and soul – to helping those Irish, and indeed all undocumented, obtain legal status. His capacity to access the highest levels of the Obama administration has been extraordinary. He has worked tirelessly to help achieve immigration reform. Billy Lawless is in the best tradition of the Irish who came to America, but never forgot the place he came from.”

Specifically, and in closing, that place is Galway. And while he is a Chicagoan now, he will always be of Galway.

The people of this wonderful city and county, both natives and adopted sons and daughters, – and now this University of which he is about to become an honorary graduate – will forever be rightly proud to call Billy Lawless one of our own.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hunc meum filium quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.