

Forum's spotlight on uncertainties facing Irish Diaspora

By Stephen McKinley
smckinley@irishecho.com

Last week's U.S.-Ireland Forum at the Affinia Hotel in Manhattan was billed as a timely serving of food for thought about the state of Irish affairs worldwide.

And it indeed offered a two-day banquet of opinion, including warnings of an uncertain future for the Irish Diaspora, entreaties for fresh measures to help undocumented Irish immigrants in the U.S. and - though some speakers feared a global Irish family increasingly estranged from the home country - all the passion and straight talking to be expected from a conference room with almost 900 Irish people attending over the two days.

The forum, organized and moderated by publisher Niall O'Dowd and sponsored by his Irish America Magazine, the American Ireland Fund and University College Dublin, brought together Irish and Irish American leaders in business, academia and media, as well as undocumented immigrants and members of the public.

Though panelists discussed a wide range of topics, it was during the closing session on Thursday that O'Dowd mentioned what seemed to encapsulate the forum's recurring theme.

During planning for the event, he said that he had contacted journalists representing the Irish Times and RTE to invite them. Both organizations declined to attend the event.

Why, asked many speakers at the forum, do the Irish in Ireland seem to disregard the Irish abroad? At a time when diaries are more packed than ever with Irish events in cities such as New York, Sydney, Boston, San Francisco and Philadelphia, newly peaceful and prosperous Ireland has little time for the Diaspora.

Dublin economist and writer David McWilliams called for a 'right of return' policy by the Irish government, modeled on how Israel opens its doors to Jews across the world, a "constant renewing" of contacts at every level of society.

But he warned that unless real treaties were negotiated between, say, Ireland and the U.S., where an estimated 45 million people claim Irish ancestry, "without a dual passport, it's still all semantics."

Passports and immigration, visas and border security are all familiar parts of an American experience, but in recent years Ireland has also facing a similar set of issues as



David McWilliams

immigrants from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa have flooded into a country with a suddenly booming economy.

Here is an area of policy-making and organization where Ireland could learn from the U.S. experience, said former congressman and immigration attorney Bruce Morrison.

Speaking of undocumented immigrants, Morrison said: "It's no longer a problem just on this side of the Atlantic."

What can be learned from America's immigration experience, he asked.

"If you don't get the policies right, you'll inflame people," he said.

"There is no greater market test of a country than if people want to come." With the attention of the audience focused on relations between Ireland and its Diaspora, Morrison said it was important to not overlook those who are today eager to emigrate from their homeland and join "the American and the Irish families."

Though vibrant and long-established, all may not be well with the Irish American communities throughout the

U.S., said Niall O'Dowd.

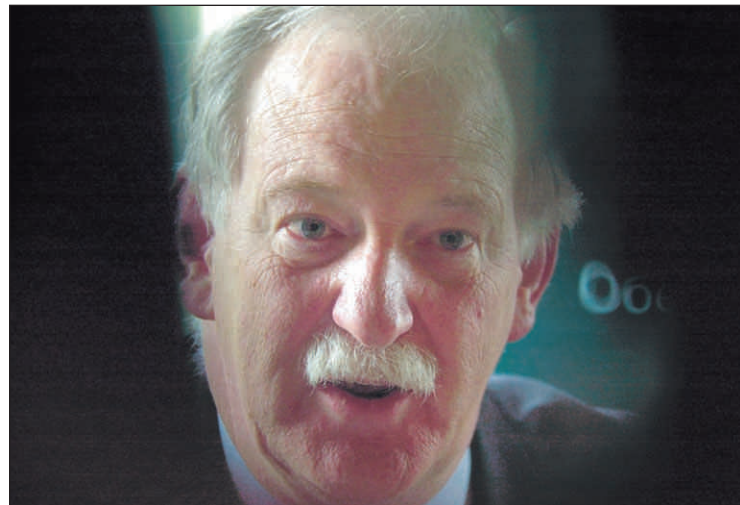
"The Irish-born section of our communities is dying," he said, citing the GAA as one of several "canaries in the coalmine," which may help



Denis Kelleher

measure the strength of ties between Ireland and the U.S.

As emigration from Ireland to America continues to decline, it was sporting events



Bruce Morrison

such as hurling and Gaelic football which suffer ahead of the wider community, because few if any new sporting talent is coming to America from Ireland, leaving GAA clubs and organizations without fresh talent.

With immigration success stories such as Don Keough, former President of Coca Cola, and Denis Kelleher, chairman of brokerage firm, Wall Street Access, in plain view at the forum, Orla Kelleher, executive director of the Aisling Irish Community Center in the Bronx posed the question: "Who will be the success stories of tomorrow?"

She noted that many Irish pubs today seem a little quieter than before, attributable in part, she argued, to increasingly healthier lifestyles, but at the same time, she said, the Aisling Center had never been busier with Irish immigrants seeking advice and help.

Would Irish companies in Ireland consider investing in or granting money to, Irish causes here in the U.S., she asked.

On day two of the forum, speakers disagreed as to the depth and extent of per-

ceived anti-American sentiment in Ireland. Some suggested that the problem was merely anti-President George W. Bush sentiment, but others argued that the Irish in Ireland continued to view the descendants of Irish immigrants with contempt.

"It's an exciting time to be involved with Diaspora issues," said Noreen Bowden, a first generation Irish New Yorker who lives in Dublin, and is director of the Emigrant Advice Network. Summing up her feelings about the forum's success, she welcomed the news that the forum would be organized again, next year.

"One thing that cropped up a few times was the idea of political participation, giving emigrants some voice in the political process is something that Ireland should probably revisit now," Bowden said. "Almost every other developed nation in the world allows its emigrants to vote, even if living permanently in another country."

A second forum, meanwhile, is being planned for next year in Dublin.

Bulger lookalikes being nabbed

By Jim Smith
jsmith@irishecho.com

BOSTON - The hunt for James "Whitey" Bulger continues this week with people who look like the fugitive Irish American mobster and his girlfriend being frequently the first to know of it.

FBI agents and Italian authorities came up empty-handed last month after releasing a photo of a couple in Sicily who resembled the 77-year-old Irish-American gangster and his longtime girlfriend, Catherine Greig.

The release of the photo, which was taken from a video shot in April by a vacationing federal agent, has led to the interrogation and brief detention of sev-

eral U.S. couples who were touring in Italy earlier this fall when the FBI agents arrived.

Among the couples mistaken for Bulger and Greig were Bob and Theresa Dowdy of Rhode Island, who were in Italy for their 47th wedding anniversary.

Dowdy, 68, and his wife were stopped and questioned by Italian police after coming out of Mass in the town of Perugia. Several days later, they were photographed and fingerprinted at the police station.

George and Iris Weiland of Madison, Wisconsin were separated from a tour group and detained for several hours.

Neither the Weilands nor the Dowdys reported any mistreatment by the Italian authorities, despite the inconvenience.

A spokesperson for the Boston office of the FBI said last week that the release of the photo did not elicit any response from the couple in the photograph, whose identity and whereabouts remain unknown.

Agents are now in London, seeking public cooperation there in the hunt for the elusive Bulger who has long been on the agency's Ten most Wanted list.

However, the newspaper Kerry's Eye has reported that the FBI is also looking closely at counties Kerry and Cork in their hunt for Bulger

"Several American associates of Bulger are known to have properties in Kerry and Cork and are regular visitors to the region," the paper reported.