

A New Immigration Movement Forms in Irish Community

By [DANIELA GERSON](#), Staff Reporter of the Sun | January 30, 2006

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The din from Rory Dolan's pub trickled in, but the hundreds of Irish immigrants packing an adjacent banquet hall in Yonkers last Friday night listened with rapt attention to the speakers before them. Mostly in their 20s and 30s, fair-skinned and clean-cut, they included construction workers and waitresses, small-business owners and parents of American citizens. Scores more were stuck in the hallway, and others pressed their faces against the fogged-up windows to get a glimpse in from outside. All wanted to hear if it was true Congress might change immigration laws.

When one speaker joked, "When they asked for your Social Security numbers, you made them up," the overfull crowd laughed knowingly. When he continued, "people were leaving, they were giving up, and you stayed with it," they nodded. And when another speaker said, "We strongly object to the fact immigrants are equated with terrorists," they erupted in cheers.

A new movement for immigration reform is being forged within the Irish community, and Friday's meeting was the kick-off for a national organizing effort. Though no poll was taken, many of the more than 400 gathered were illegal immigrants who had overstayed tourist visas. Others came to the meeting out of concern for undocumented Irish they know. The response overwhelmed even the organizers, some of whom helped forge a similar movement in the late 1980s that resulted in 48,000 visas for Irish immigrants.

A key difference today, however, is that Irish emigration to America is dropping: Last year more Irish returned to the Emerald Isle than left, due largely to an improved economy there and the American government's increased enforcement of immigration laws. The Irish government predicted last fall that in 2005, roughly 19,000 Irish nationals would return, while the number emigrating would drop to 16,600. In 2005, the Department of Homeland Security issued just 395 immigrant visas to Ireland, compared with, for example, 3,998 to Albania, 5,761 to Ethiopia, and 36,381 to Mexico.

Still, the emigrant experience and the hardships facing the estimated 25,000-50,000 Irish illegal immigrants in America remain a concern of legislators in Ireland.

A long-awaited debate on immigration has yet to hit the Senate floor in Washington, but Dublin has already considered what needs to be done to fix America's broken system. "Emigration is a central theme of the Irish experience," the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern, told members of the Irish parliament last October. "For the undocumented, the stress of separation, the strain and anxiety of living in the shadows, and the deep sadness of being unable to return to Ireland to visit aging parents or to attend family occasions such as weddings or funerals, remain traumatic."

After a short discussion, when lawmakers from diverse parties cited similar concerns, the Irish parliament passed a motion endorsing a leading bill in Congress, sponsored by Senators McCain and

Kennedy. The Senate bill, in contrast to an enforcement-only immigration bill passed last month in the House, proposes to create new legal avenues for foreigners through a guest worker program and a path to permanent residency for the nation's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants. Key to Dublin's concerns, Mr. Ahern said, "it would enable undocumented people, including the undocumented Irish, to participate fully in the life of their adopted home, free from fear and uncertainty."

This support from the Irish government, including a \$30,000 grant last week to the newly formed Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform in New York City, has buoyed a movement just beginning to gain steam in America. Friday's meeting in Yonkers starts a national effort that will go next to Philadelphia and then to Boston, rallying support for immigration reform among Irish Americans across the country.

Even some organizers of the effort were surprised by the extent to which Irish Americans still live illegally in America, unable to receive visas.

"We were staggered to find out that there are believed to be 40,000 undocumented Irish immigrants, and some of them have been here 15, 16 years, and families are being divided by the Atlantic," the executive director of the group, Kelly Fincham, said. "Many Irish-Americans felt that it [illegal immigration] was no longer an issue."

But in Woodlawn in the Bronx, or Woodside in the Queens, such cases are easy to find.

Many, such as Julie, a 35-year-old Woodlawn resident, never intended to immigrate to America. She left Ireland at 24 with a girlfriend, planning for New York to be the first leg of an around-the-world trip. Her friend continued her travels, but Julie fell in love with New York. Eleven years later, she is now the mother of two U.S. citizens, a girl age 5 and a boy of 19 months.

While she is open about her immigration status with her employers, Julie, a nanny, asked that her last name not be used, because parents at her children's school do not know. Her husband, an Irish illegal immigrant she met in America, owns a flooring business. Over the years, they have tried various avenues without success to receive a visa. Since the September 11, 2001, attacks, returning to Ireland for a visit has become impossible. "My father's sick, and it's just really sad," Julie says.

Another looming problem is driving. A sweep by the state Department of Motor Vehicles, and federal regulations passed last year as part of a national security bill, will soon make her ineligible for a driver's license, which she needs to drive her children to school. She has a couple of years before her current license, granted before a Social Security number was required, expires. Her husband has been driving without a license.

The owners of Prime Cuts, an Irish butcher shop in Woodlawn, specializing in "home-cured meats and homemade pies" worry its clientele, faced with stark options in America, will disappear.

"Before there always were people coming and going," an owner, Carmel McHugh, said. Now, they're just leaving. "Basically they can't do anything. They'd prefer to be legal and work."

For Friday's meeting, Ms. McHugh, 47, and her husband closed their shop early and found a seat near the front of the crowd. They stood out as among the older attendees in the crowd. In America for 20

years, Ms. McHugh and her husband both received visas made available during an earlier reform.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Irish-American organizers and politicians succeeded in creating visas for European immigrants who felt they were getting squeezed out by the 1965 liberalizing of immigration law that eliminated ethnic quotas. Most notably, the Diversity Visa Program, of which Senator Kennedy was a backer, initially reserved 16,000 visas a year for "natives of Ireland." The policy changed in 1995, however, contributing to the recent drop in Irish immigration.

At Friday's meeting, the speakers said they needed to carry forward the lessons of past successes into the future. The publisher of the Irish Voice newspaper in New York City, Niall O'Dowd, an organizer in the earlier reform movement, said the support of the Irish government is just enough to get the new effort started. In addition to reaching out to the senators from New York ("Guess where they are on Kennedy-McCain?" he asked the Irish immigrants at the meeting, "They're nowhere. That's our fault."), the hundreds gathered would need to make contributions to campaigns and fill buses to lobby Washington.

"We the Irish are going to take back this issue of immigration reform. We are going to get a bill," Mr. O'Dowd said to applause. "You're not just some guy or woman in the Bronx, you are part of a movement. We know, we've been there in the 1980s."