

Mayor, Cathaoirleach, Distinguished Elected Members of the Association of Irish Local Government and all here present.

I am delighted to be present here and I wish first of all to sincerely congratulate yourself Pat on a great year as President of this important National organisation.

It is with great pleasure that I address you this morning here in Ennis on the topic of “Ireland Fighting Back.” This is a most timely occasion to address important issues. We have been through the worst economic recession in living memory. We have seen events in this country over the past ten years which have no parallel in our history. No country has ever seen all its financial institutions become insolvent at once but we have. No country since the United States in the 1920s has seen its GDP rise so fast and fall as furiously as ours did between 2001 and 2011. The move from net immigration to large scale net emigration over the same period was unprecedented. From net immigration of 30,000 people per year at the height of the economic boom we saw emigration in 2009 at the rate of 1,000 people per week.

Those are statistics. They are facts. But there are dimensions other than facts. Socially, morally and politically Ireland has seen immense change over the same period. There is a crisis of confidence in institutions of all colour and hue. One by one Church, Gardaí, Semi-States and an endless list of pillars of society have cracked and in some cases crumbled.

Our own attitudes as a people have been challenged by all this turmoil and there is a deep risk that actions unthinkable up to recent years have become social norms in our society. I believe the idea that families would be left homeless to sleep outdoors every night or live in emergency accommodation would be unthinkable in any of the villages or towns where you and I grew up and yet that too is a norm now. The real risk of course is that the economic boom and burst has changed our moral foundation and upset our social commitments. We need to be very careful to ensure that this is not allowed to happen.

There are some constants however and what is important is not how we view the past or the present it is what we do about it.

From the earliest days of the first Supermac's outlet in Ballinasloe I have learned that there are constantly challenges which have to be addressed. The modern day challenges are no less and may in fact be no greater than the challenges of those days in the 1970s. What is certain however is that the opportunities are equally great now but do we see them? Has our attitude to progress blinded us from seeing opportunity? Has our conditioning meant that we have not sufficient roots in our past to be able to rise above the challenges and focus instead on the opportunities?

I in my own decisions in business have been much influenced by the famous quote from Shakespeare "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat. And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures."

In addressing yourselves here today I am very aware that in the truth of those words there is a need for us all to recognise that now is the time of the tide. Together we can shape how we fight back and I would like to put three brief points before you this morning on how we should move forward together from here;

Firstly I would suggest that we need to be careful of the values and characteristics which made us successful as a Nation in the years since independence. I believe these were the same values which sustained us in the struggle for independence and they are the same values which will let us fight back and re-build this Country. I was privileged to be invited to attend the Saint Patrick's Day celebrations in the White House in 2015. From there you can see Ireland differently. You see this country, a tiny island in the Atlantic, plagued by almost a millennium of occupation, a population less than a New York borough and yet here we are the centre of world attention. There is no other Country for which the President of the United States sets a day aside each year to celebrate the very fact of who we are. No other Country has the influence or reputation that we have around the world. I can tell you that our economic success plays little part in that good standing but that good standing plays a huge part in our economic success. In fact our roots in culture, neutrality, sport, peace-making and sincerity are what make us great. Father Harry personified the most crucial pillar earlier and President Kennedy put that pillar first when he said his ancestors left this island with nothing but a deep faith. We need to be

Careful to build on these foundations and traditions. It is vital that our State but more especially each one of us supports the very things that make us what we are. That is why I was thrilled to sponsor the All Ireland Fleadh Ceol here in Ennis last year and I'm happy to announce that Supermac's will sponsor the Fleadh here in Ennis again this year. It is events like this which lay foundations, open doors and define who we are. I would ask of each of you therefore to look at your own Council urban or rural and ask yourself whether the cultural dimension of your City or County is well served by your Council. Of course it is not all up to you but leadership is very important and if you give the lead, the support and the platform the activity will happen.

Secondly I believe that our greatest asset is our people. We need to provide an environment where each new generation of Irish people is fostered in the traditions of what it is to be Irish and harness that quality in innovation, a desire for self-employment and the integrity it takes to make it happen. Councils play a huge role in defining people. Each one of us is a product of our place. It is our pride in our place that drives us and defines us. Councils need to emphasise the value of local and do everything possible to connect people to place. Nothing drives us like competition and a Local Authority version of the Tidy Towns competition directed at villages and towns would be a great start.

I want also to talk about the perceived decline in the economies and social context of rural Ireland and to cite a strategy as the third pillar of this brief contribution. In doing so I believe this is the most appropriate forum in which to address the challenges facing rural Ireland and plan our fight back.

Everyone here is familiar with the decline in rural towns and villages. Controversy over the closure of post offices, garda stations and other rural services is constant. Irish pubs are less frequent sights in Ireland than they are in most foreign cities.

I would suggest to you very strongly that this decline is not social in context. People have not changed all that much. It is economic in context and it is derived from an investment strategy which is perverse, out of step with human needs and is a paradox to what it means to be Irish. That investment strategy is driven in turn by policies which are derived from the thinking which was key to our economic development in the 1960s but which I would suggest to you has actually succeeded too well and needs to be reviewed. The good news is that you, the elected members of Local Authorities are probably the only people

empowered to turn economic decline around because you are the Government in your own County or City who decides planning policy for the next five years when you make the Development Plan.

It is appropriate that we are discussing this topic here in County Clare. It was here economic policy first provided for targeted economic development in a defined hub by the establishment of the Shannon Free Zone. The idea was simple and yet hugely successful. There were vital reasons at the time to implement the strategy as a trans-atlantic airport in Ireland could only survive if its hinterland was defined as a preferred zone for economic development. The Shannon Region experiment has been copied all over the world and this County should be hugely proud of its role in leading that model.

We do not now need to re-invent the model. We need to copy the Shannon model. We need to identify the places of strategic economic importance and focus incentive on them. We react to the same incentives now as we did half a century ago and I would challenge you this morning to review whether the Development Plan in your Local Authority area addresses the questions posed by rural decline. Does your Plan direct investment out of local areas into Industrial Estates in large towns and cities? If it does then how can you be surprised at population decline, school closures and post office closures in the villages? You will hear the opposing voices tell you the roads are too narrow, the services are inadequate and so on but such blanket opposition is without foundation. The fact is there are many businesses whose natural comfort zone is in rural areas and you need to facilitate their locating there. Why should it be easier to get planning permission in Dublin?

Population statistics emerging from the earliest returns of the 2016 census suggest a huge concentration of people in cities with an almost equally large population commuting to these cities every day. This is entirely unsustainable. It is destroying family life and forcing people into hostile living environments.

You as elected members of Local Authorities will have a unique opportunity to not only make your voice heard but actually input into how this trend can be reversed when you speak on the National Planning Framework legislation later this year. This legislation will determine the future of where Irish people will live and work. The eventual legislation should build again on the Shannon model. It should incentivise a Sense of Place by encouraging people to invest in job creation in local areas. All development follows from investment and all

investment is influenced by incentives. I am asking you therefore to ensure that special tax incentives are put in place to assist investment in areas of population decline and in towns and villages where otherwise the community will lose its identity.

As for services you have a unique role also in their provision and again there is no need to re-invent the wheel. If we could bring electricity to every house on the island in the Rural Electrification Scheme in the 1920s we can do the same for broadband a hundred years later. We can be the first country to do it. We can show again that we are innovators.

Each of these initiatives is as important today as it was when this County of Clare hosted projects which were the stuff of dreams and yet succeeded. The Shannon Scheme is one excellent example and so too is Shannon Airport and the Shannon Free Zone. The lead role played by Clare County Council in developing the Cliffs of Moher site which attracted as many visitors last year as the combined populations of Dublin, Galway and Limerick is the latest model of what a great, focused, commercially-minded Local Authority can achieve.

I have total confidence in your ability as elected members to ask the questions, address the issues and correct the imbalances.

The fight-back is as Irish as patriotism. It is important we get it right.