



Minister for Agriculture, Brendan Smith TD, speaking with Pat O'Keeffe, news editor, *Irish Farmers Journal* at the Cavan Crystal Hotel.

Smith promises to be energetic

PAT O'KEEFFE
NEWS EDITOR

WTO. Lisbon. CAP Health Check. These three 'major ticket items' have dominated newly appointed Minister for Agriculture Brendan Smith's time since his appointment.

On top of that, he is this week facing demands for action from protesting fisherman, who also form part of his wide brief.

While I waited to meet him in the Cavan Crystal Hotel on Monday, staff actually rolled out the red carpet in anticipation of the popular local TD's arrival.

In the past three weeks, he has been abroad three times;

twice to Council of Ministers and a food summit in Rome last week.

So is he enjoying it? "Absolutely. It's been extremely hectic for the last few weeks and I am looking forward to getting myself better briefed."

Describing himself as "not a man to take long holidays", he said that if he gets 10 days off in August he'll be happy.

"What I want to do in July is get out around the country, because I'm a firm believer that there is so much to be learned by going out and meeting people at the coalface," he said.

So, what does he bring to the role?

"I will bring commitment, energy and I'm fortunate to have knowledge of most of the Department, having been a Minister of State from September 2004 to June 2007. I come from a constituency with a good mix of agriculture so, as a TD, I am aware of the issues that affect them".

His understanding of the brief will be aided by the fact that he is the youngest of nine children who grew up on a small dairy farm in Bawnboy, where his brother Sean farms today.

I put it to the Minister that his role is simply to rubber stamp decisions made by civil servants.

"No — there will be no

rubber stamping of decisions by me."

"I will be relentless in pursuing and defending the interests of Irish farming and rural communities where and whenever necessary," he said.

Growing the productive capacity of Irish agriculture will be his priority. He added that he has already noticed a change in the mood at Council of Ministers meetings since he last attended them a few years ago.

"There is a concern now in Europe about the need to ensure a secure supply of safe food. I welcome that change."

Lisbon has been a key priority for the Minister and the past week has seen the Government belatedly win over the support of the farm organisations.

He was keen to take the opportunity to urge a strong 'yes' vote.

"I want to have my hand strengthened on Thursday. We are at a crucial time in very important negotiations," he said.

The Minister was also keen to put on record his appreciation of the extensive IFA campaign for a yes vote — "they are putting in huge resources," he said.

Why did the Government hesitate before committing to using a veto in the WTO process, I asked.

"Clarification was needed and that clarification was provided. Ireland can veto an unacceptable deal. The Lisbon Treaty will not change that — I think that was a total misrepresentation in the debate by the 'No' camp. The Taoiseach's statement to the ICMSA and the IFA are entirely consistent with our approach".

Why did it take so long to give that assurance? Is it true

the Government thought 'we don't need the farm organisations, we are going to win it without them' and it was only when the polls got tight that a statement was given?

"That type of allegation is simply untrue. We can go back and check my statements in the Dáil and at the Council of Ministers meetings. The Government's position on the WTO has been very clear and very consistent.

"We have repeatedly said that the current proposals leave agriculture with a disproportionate burden and deliver little in other sectors and are, therefore, unacceptable to Ireland. And we are not alone in that view.

"Naturally, as a trading nation, we are in favour of a WTO agreement but it must be balanced. It cannot undermine or damage our agricultural sector," he said.

FARM BUILDINGS

Q. Will the deadline for completion of work under the Farm Waste Management (FWM) scheme be extended?

A. No, it will not be extended and the Department has been reminding farmers of that deadline which was a condition of EU Commission State Aid. So, I'd like to remind every farmer to get the work completed in time for the deadline.

Q. Is there any scope for extending the deadline on the paperwork?

A. No, we want all the paperwork by the end of December and we have been consistently saying to farmers to get the work done.

Q. Will the Farm Improvement Scheme (FIS) be reopened this year?

A. The scheme was closed after the €79m allocated to it was used up. I have no plans to re-open the scheme at this particular time but I know that it will be raised in the forthcoming Partnership Talks.

Q. Have you any light Minister for the farmers in limbo — those who submitted in the last 10 days before closure of the scheme?

A. We will process the applications up to 21 October. We have enough funding for those. If some of the original applicants don't pursue their application, the next applications will be allocated.

Q. Any timescale?

A. I have asked that applications be processed as quickly as possible so that people will know where they stand.

BRAZILIAN BEEF IMPORTS

Q. How long do you expect the current restrictions to remain in place?

A. It's difficult to say if the Brazilians will get their act together and start to certify herds in big numbers. Our understanding is that domestic consumption has increased in Brazil and they still have huge markets in Russia and the Middle East. From their point of view, that has diminished the impact of the restrictions.

SHEEP

Q. Minister, we have seen a sharp decline in sheep numbers and people are worried that it may become a downward spiral, with lower throughput. Your predecessor Minister Coughlan promised €34m for sheep, but very little has been delivered.



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Q&A

that seeks to move towards a GM-free zone. That is aimed at discouraging the cultivation of GM crops in Ireland rather than a ban on imports. Ireland is heavily dependent on imports of feed from regions where GM crops dominate. It's also worth noting that, to date, there has been no demand for the cultivation of GM crops in this country.

DAIRY

Q. How is the expansion of milk testing monitoring progressing? Any view on the need for a centralised milk testing service that includes health monitoring?

A. Milk test monitoring was agreed in Partnership and commenced on 1 April. As part of the process, it was agreed that figures would be published every quarter. The first set of results for the three months to the end of June will be published as soon as possible.

Regarding centralised testing, I understand there is some interest at farm level in a move towards centralised testing to replace some 20 laboratories around the country. This is primarily a matter for the industry and I am prepared to consider how the Department might assist in seeing that matter over the line.

Q. I presume you won't be dropping the ring fencing of milk quota Minister?

A. No I will not.

Q. Do you believe the north east needs a cheese plant and were you disappointed that the proposed project involving Lakeland, Town of Monaghan and Connacht Gold did not materialise?

A. The project was not approved for commercial and technical reasons but I know that the consortium is fully aware that, should a suitable project be put forward, the Department of Agriculture and Enterprise Ireland will consider it on its merits. There is no point supporting a project for the sake of it. We will support viable projects that meet the criteria. The worst possible thing would be to support a project that would not be successful and that would be a huge burden on the consortium members.

Q. Are you confident that it will be possible to secure additional milk quota over and above the 1% per annum proposed?

A. At the Council of Ministers meeting, there was a large variation in views. We are fighting very strongly on the need for additional quota.

A. The FIS closed six weeks after specifications for sheep handling were issued and the REPS mixed grazing measure is quite restrictive.

I know myself from meeting farmers and the farm organisations there is concern. I'm anxious to get measures from the Malone report up and running. Money is being paid out from the National Reserve at present and progress has been made on discussions with ICBF. Trials are underway on mechanical grading.

Q. Will you respond to last week's IFA call for an investigation into claims of collusion between sheep meat plants?

A. If there are allegations of collusion, that's a matter for the Competition Authority. On the matter of price, the Malone report did raise the issue of a pricing structure to reward quality. I have to say that progress has been slow, but there has been some progress recently on a price grid.

Q. Every week, we carry a table of beef prices — can we have the same for sheep?

A. Yes, there should be price reporting similar to that for beef — we need that transparency.

TILLAGE

Q. How strongly will Ireland oppose the change from risk to hazard based assessment of pesticides that would take out a number of crop protection products?

A. This concerns me as it ignores the scientific principle of risk assessment. I am seeking to ensure that the regulation enshrines the principle of risk assessment in decision-making while at the same time ensuring the safety of consumers, operators and the environment is protected.

Q. There is a belief that Minister Sargent came in and changed Ireland's voting stance on Herculex maize. Is the Green Party now deciding Ireland's policy on GM?

A. No, the situation is that there is a commitment in the Programme for Government



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—Minister for Agriculture, Brendan Smith.



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