

## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



## FARMERS' PR CAMPAIGN

FOR DECADES scientists have warned of the extreme vulnerability of global food production systems to disruption as climate change accelerates. This is now coming to pass in real time, with farmers across Ireland and Europe feeling the brunt of ever more extreme weather.

Last year, torrential rainfall hampered cereal crop production from France to Poland, while drought in southern Europe saw Spanish wheat, rice and barley crops hit their lowest production level in over a decade. Water scarcity is approaching crisis point in many Mediterranean countries, with large swathes of farmland in danger of becoming permanently infertile as



Ursula von der Leyen

temperatures continue to climb.

The spate of angry protests by farmers across Europe in recent weeks has seen the EU back down on many of its green commitments, including dropping agricultural emissions from its 2040 climate roadmap, with EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen abandoning plans to sharply reduce pesticide use across the EU.

While ironically much of this unrest is related to the pressure farmers are feeling as a result of extreme weather conditions, it has been hijacked and weaponised by a combination of far-right populists and agri-industrial interests to dismantle climate and biodiversity protection measures.

They have infiltrated and manipulated farmer groups and co-opted them to do their dirty work in destroying vital protections for nature and putting the kibosh on climate action across Europe.

The aggressive nature of many of these protests is doing little to garner public support for farmers. And some actions, such as the recent spraying of slurry into the offices of the French biodiversity agency, have provoked a furious public reaction.

In Ireland, despite the millions that have been spent in recent years selling the idea that our agriculture is clean and green, the battle for hearts and minds is not going well. This is evidenced by a recent report in the *Farmers Journal*

headed, 'New body to tackle poor perception of farming'.

The proposed new group will be given the task of countering what the *Journal* terms "misinformation regarding the farm sector" and challenging what it sees as the negative portrayal of agriculture on "environment, water quality, biodiversity loss and climate change".

Discussions around the proposed new agency are reportedly being facilitated by Bord Bia, the Irish food board, along with such bastions of environmental stewardship as the meat processors and dairy co-ops. Awkwardly, dairy and meat companies regularly feature on the Environmental Protection Agency's list of worst offenders in terms of environmental non-compliance and pollution issues.

A figure of €5m as a budget for this new body is being mooted, possibly raised via levies. Confusingly, there is already a slew of groups, from the National Dairy Council and Bord Bia to Agri Aware and Meat & Dairy Facts, already involved in assorted projects to spin the sector's reputation, so it's obviously felt they are not delivering.

It is unclear where exactly this latest boondoggle will fit into the existing agencies but one thing remains firmly off the table – reshaping agriculture to be genuinely sustainable, meaning low emissions and less chemical fertilisers, pesticides and pollution.

Still, why bother with the tough task of actual reform when you can just crank up the PR instead?



## DUP ELECTION NIGHTMARE

IT'S CHANGED times in the north. There's a reversal of the natural order of politics. Turmoil and confusion in unionism threatens the stability of the Stormont institutions, while Sinn Féin works to steady the ship. With Dáil elections looming, it is in SF's interest to maintain a working assembly and executive to show the party can run an administration in co-operation with its DUP partners. That's exactly what the DUP's opponents in unionism don't want.

DUP interim leader Gavin Robinson will have no honeymoon period. In the immediate future there will have to be a formal leadership election, as stipulated by the party's constitution. The 11 members of the DUP officer board hurriedly appointed Robinson the day Jeffrey Donaldson was charged but the 130-strong party executive will have to ratify him. There's scope for ructions then.

The party is moving heaven and earth to avoid a contest between Robinson and any candidate who opposes what party dissidents call the 'Donaldson deal', which got the

executive up and running again in February. So far, no credible opponent has emerged. The election of a deputy leader to fill the vacancy created by Robinson's elevation could be a different matter.

Potential division in the DUP executive is being stoked by Jim Allister, leader of the extreme Traditional Unionist Voice, who last month signed an election pact with the radical-right Reform UK party to fight seats in the north. Last weekend Allister repeated his intention to fight all 18 seats.

He also disclosed that last summer he had offered a Westminster election pact to the DUP and UUP to select a single unionist candidate in each constituency in the common cause of opposing the Irish Protocol. That might seem impertinent as the TUV have no Westminster seats but Allister was pursuing the chimera of 'unionist unity', offering the DUP a free run in key constituencies to maximise the anti-protocol vote. The DUP turned him down.

According to Allister, East Belfast MP Robinson was particularly opposed because he wants a UUP candidate to stand in East Belfast to split the Alliance party vote. Robinson's majority over Alliance leader Naomi Long in 2019 was only 1,819 out of a 42,600 poll. If Allister fields a candidate against him, he's a goner, which will cause a huge headache for the DUP because it will need yet another new leader.

Such is Allister's animosity towards what he calls the DUP 'protocol implementers' that he seems determined to go through with splitting the unionist vote across the north,

even though his TUV has no chance of winning a seat. What he wants, of course, is that individual DUP Westminster candidates reaffirm their opposition to the Windsor Framework and the 'Donaldson deal', thereby splitting the DUP.

Robinson has pushed back against Allister's threats, warning that Allister is in danger of allowing SF, in Robinson's words, to score "a hat trick". That is to say, SF winning most seats in the 2022 assembly elections, the 2023 council elections and then the 2024 Westminster elections.

The Westminster elections present Robinson with another headache: who to field in Donaldson's seat of Lagan Valley? Donaldson is currently suspended from the DUP so he won't be a candidate.

The DUP has three assembly members in Lagan Valley: Edwin Poots, the assembly speaker; Paul Givan, the education minister; and Emma Little-Pengelly, the deputy first minister. None of them is likely to risk standing, especially with a TUV candidate

also standing and likely to hand the seat to Alliance. Nobody's hurrying to fill the vacancy.

To complicate matters further, Doug Beattie, the UUP leader, has declared he will stand candidates in all constituencies. The UUP has no Westminster seats but with the turbulence in the DUP and TUV rivalry, the party has a chance of picking up one in South Antrim from a low-profile DUP incumbent.

Meanwhile SF stays aloof. Is there a word in Irish for *schadenfreude*?



Gavin Robinson