

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



AGRI-LOBBY FRENZY

THE FARMERS are revolting. Fresh from strong-arming the Government into securing a new derogation from the EU's anti-pollution Nitrates Directive, followed by their success in having Ireland vote against the crucial Mercosur trade deal, you would think the agri lobby's feeding frenzy had been sated.

Think again. The state's repeated capitulation to this small but noisy lobby group has only sharpened its appetite for chaos. Its latest target is Bord Bia chair Larry Murrin.

The Dawn Farm Foods chief stands accused of the grievous crime of importing a tiny percentage of beef from Brazil, an offence for which the Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) is demanding his head.

But Murrin has given the IFA *et al* the two-fingered salute, dismissing their campaign as "emotional nonsense".



Michael Healy-Rae

He blasted their hypocrisy in having no problem importing nearly a million tonnes of animal feed each year from Mercosur countries, while huffing and puffing about Dawn importing less than 1% of its beef from these same, ahem, havens of low standards.

Dawn is a huge buyer of Irish beef, so it takes special chutzpah for its own suppliers to attempt to bully Murrin out of his role.

There is widespread anger in both Fianna Fáil and the Blueshirts that, having yet again given the agri lobby everything it asked for, it is somehow never enough. An exasperated Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, said at the weekend the protest had "gone too far", adding that it "goes against any logic of our exporting global supply chain operations".

Beef farmer and FG agriculture minister Martin Heydon also denounced the IFA's "rash decision to rush straight out to protest", adding that it has damaged Bord Bia's reputation. The Government, Heydon added, "does not operate by mob rule". For his pains, an IFA 'mob' duly picketed his office two days later.

This cack-handed protest has managed to infuriate even the most stalwart defender of rural Ireland, Michael Healy-Rae.

The junior minister accused the IFA of "hitching their trailer to Sinn Féin's wagon", adding that many of the TDs calling for Murrin's head "wouldn't know the difference of a bull from a heifer".

SF's Martin Kenny put down a motion in

the Dáil calling on the agriculture minister to remove Murrin from his post, while insinuating that Brazilian beef was "possibly contaminated" – parroting an unproven populist allegation emanating from the IFA and amplified in the farm press echo chamber. The increasingly tone-deaf histrionics emanating from Farm Centre have puzzled observers.

It also speaks to the decline in what was once Ireland's most formidable lobbying operation. An insight into the decline of the IFA as a political force in rural Ireland came during the presidential election, when nine former IFA presidents publicly urged support for the doomed FG candidate, Heather Humphreys.

Their counsel was, to put it mildly, widely ignored.

TWO CHEERS for the intrepid team at the Business Post. Its years of relentless campaigning for the removal of the cap at Dublin Airport finally seems to have paid off. Last Sunday's edition blazed the story (yet again) across its front page that a new law "will remove airport passenger cap forever". So electrifying was this "victory for common sense" that the paper ran a front-page editorial to mark this seismic day for Ireland Inc.

In case anyone missed its plane-spotting obsession, the front page also prominently featured a yarn about DAA chief Kenny Jacobs' exit from his role. Is the Post starting to read like an in-flight magazine?



MANDELSON'S IRISH STINT

THE DUP was delighted with Peter Mandelson's appointment as UK ambassador to Washington last February. Deputy first minister Emma Little-Pengelly was photographed with him when she visited for St Patrick's Day.

Afterwards she gushed: "Lord Mandelson served as our secretary of state and has a detailed knowledge and understanding of Northern Ireland. This provides a huge opportunity to have a real champion in Washington, who will promote Northern Ireland as the UK ambassador." Huh.

Northern nationalists disagreed. Mandelson was northern secretary from 1999 to 2001, when he resigned for exerting undue influence on the Home Office to gain British citizenship for an Indian millionaire.

Mandelson exhibited unionist bias and nationalists remembered he had unionist pedigree. His grandfather, Herbert Morrison, as home secretary provocatively interned Fermanagh Sinn Féin MP Cahir Healy on July 11, 1941.

Mandelson's knowledge of the north, extolled by Little-Pengelly, was such that in his first speech as northern secretary he

referred to himself as secretary of state for Ireland. After that unpromising start, he began to rub SF, the SDLP and the Irish government the wrong way. His appointment came at a crucial juncture when the power-sharing executive, the North-South Ministerial Council and the now long-forgotten Forum were being constructed after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Equally critical was reform of policing to implement Chris Patten's Independent Policing Report.

Ray Basset, a retired senior foreign affairs official and later joint secretary in the Belfast-based British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, remembers Mandelson as "full of his own importance" and considers him to be the worst northern secretary.

Basset says Mandelson "jeopardised the entire peace process because he was keen to curry favour with unionists" and his "first instinct" was to reject swathes of the recommended police reform that unionists opposed. Basset believes that would have been a "disaster", which Dublin successfully prevented.

In the post-GFA arrangements, a lot of effort was invested in 'equality of status and parity of esteem', particularly in symbolism. But Mandelson insisted that the Royal Courts of Justice name was retained and the royal escutcheons continued to be displayed.

He never recognised the legitimacy of nationalist aspirations and only ever referred to "the two traditions", whatever that meant. In policing, he even wanted to retain the title RUC, which would have lost SF's support.

In the fraught matter of decommissioning

(not resolved until 2006), Mandelson took David Trimble's side, which was in breach of the stages agreed in the GFA. Trimble refused to join the power-sharing executive with the SDLP until the IRA had begun to decommission and Mandelson supported him.

In the end Mandelson took powers in 2000 to dissolve the assembly, much to the anger of SF, which considered it British interference in self-determination. In fact SF would not return to Stormont until the British gave up the power to dissolve the power-sharing structures so that only the executive could dissolve itself by either the first or deputy first minister resigning. The British retained the power to suspend the assembly, and did so repeatedly between 2001 and 2007.

Luckily relations between the UK Cabinet Office, foreign affairs and the Taoiseach's Office were cordial and well developed from 1997 to 2000 and the personal rapport between Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair was excellent.

Ahern had little to do with Mandelson, who in his view "was a tricky chap to deal with", something perhaps that Ahern would know about. Instead, Bertie was able to go over Mandelson's head in personal calls to Blair to resolve differences.

Basset's memory of Mandelson's vanity and self-importance reached their peak with the trappings available to the northern secretary. Basset says: "Boy did he love having Hillsborough Castle at his disposal."

There's now an inquiry into whom he entertained there. There's silence from the DUP.



Peter Mandelson