

Ireland's 'ear to the ground' in Europe

McGuinness makes her voice heard

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When the EU dramatically imposed a blanket ban on the importation of Brazilian beef last January, Ireland East MEP Mairéad McGuinness was the one who broke the story to the Irish nation on RTÉ's *News at One*.

As a former agricultural journalist, McGuinness was always going to be a prolific source of European news for the Irish media.

McGuinness has been in the thick of the action since her poll-topping election to the European Parliament in June 2004. She has been one of our more visible representatives. While others are undoubtedly doing good work, McGuinness is better at telling us about it. "When I was elected, I committed to bringing back the information, good and bad. MEPs over the years have failed to communicate. I understand the media, which probably helps".

Some people had told her that the European Parliament was 'irrelevant' but, in contrast, she has found that "if you speak, you are heard".

Looking back now at her switch from journalism to politics, the former *'Ear to the Ground'* presenter said she felt that "the time was right for a change". She added: "Doing the same thing was possible, but not attractive to me".

Initially she was daunted

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by her lack of knowledge of some topics, but quickly realised that she knew as much and more than others. From her journalistic career she had mastered the ability "to gather information quickly from various sources and run with it".

McGuinness has always lived her life at a fast pace and invariably juggled a multitude of commitments. "I am driven by nature, perhaps to excess. I go at a hard pace. There's always a lot going on." A time management course taken during her stint with the *Irish Farmers Journal* has proven invaluable, she maintained.

When we chatted for an hour in her office beside her home in Dromconrath, Co Meath recently, the mobile and landline rang at least eight times. She took each call and promised to ring them back. She apologised for taking the calls, but with a report on *Equitable Life* just published, she was in demand.

As well as chairing the committee examining the demise of *Equitable Life*, McGuinness sits on the Parliament's increasingly influential agriculture committee. Her timing could not have been better, with a vastly increased public and media interest in food price inflation and concerns on security of supply.

She said that, despite the fact the stores are now empty, there is still a mistaken belief that the EU has large stocks of food. The big issue now, in her opinion, is how we stimulate a much needed increase in agricultural production in the face of spiralling input costs.

"It's the elephant in the room. Globally, farmers produce food to feed themselves and to make a profit. They need a reasonable income," she said. "If farmers can't make a margin above the cost of inputs, they will simply not produce".

She now has the opportu-



Mairéad McGuinness (centre), pictured at the launch of the ACCBank Women in Agriculture Conference with (from left) Bernadette Maguire, ACCBank Wealth Management and Mairéad Lavery, editor, *Irish Country Living*. The conference, which takes place on World Rural Women's Day on 15 October 2008 in the Hodson Bay Hotel, Athlone, will examine key issues affecting rural women's lives such as succession planning and pensions.

nity to use her knowledge to help prepare a global food report. It will examine Europe's role in the global food supply. In a European context, she said that regulators need to have a better understanding of the impact of their policies. For example, the EU will ban caged hens, but will probably import dried egg produced by hens kept in cages outside of the EU — without European standards and controls. A similar issue may arise with pesticides.

"We could see a situation where plant protection products banned in the EU will remain on the market in the rest of the world and we could see produce imported into the EU which has been produced using substances banned here".

As a member of the Agriculture committee, McGuinness travelled to Brazil in May on a fact-finding mission. She was amazed at the arrogant attitude displayed by the Brazilians. "We weren't happy with what we saw in Brazil, particularly their attitude to their customers," she said. She also came home with concerns about human and environmental issues surrounding the production of ethanol from sugar cane.

"If we are importing ethanol, we will have to insist on standards. We need to avoid solving a problem for ourselves but creating a problem for others," she said.

Last year, McGuinness decided to take a gamble and contest the General Election in her native Co Louth. Was she gutted when she narrowly failed to win a seat? "Not a bit of it. I felt the same the morning after as I did the day before." She just took it all in her hectic stride.

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