



# THE INTERVIEW

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PAT O'KEEFFE

## Berkery: 'Always inform the debate with the facts'

**A**fter serving with eight presidents since his appointment as general secretary in 1983, Tipperary man Michael Berkery is taking his leave of the Irish Farmers Association (IFA) this week.

In a career that frequently took him to Brussels, Geneva and Washington, he was equally at home guiding proceedings in Athenry, Ennis-corthy or Mallow.

Aged 60, he announced his retirement last September. The Toomevara man will remain as chairman of FBD Holdings plc but has yet to confirm any other definite intentions. "I'm going to finish writing the IFA history and I might also do something on the development side in Africa," he said. His farm on the Tipperary-Offaly border can also expect to see more of him.

Maximising farm incomes was and remains his mantra and he is non-apologetic for any actions pursuing that objective. He attracted criticism for the IFA's Lisbon stance, but remains undeterred, with a well-rehearsed answer that translates as "the end justified the means". The end, of course, being WTO, not Lisbon. And if there is any blame, he maintains that it rests with the Government.

During his tenure, the sound bite for the media has become increasingly important, but he invariably left

that to the President of the day.

He is highly appreciative of the voluntary efforts of countless IFA officers and led what he describes as a "team of very dedicated staff".

While it was 12-hour days a lot of the time, he enjoyed it so much, he actually found it hard to go through with the decision to leave it all behind.

There were always issues. "Many times I came back from Brussels after concluding negotiations, thinking I had two weeks of calm ahead, only for something unexpected to come over the horizon by the time I got home".

He describes the IFA as "a coalition of many interests — geographical and commodities, type of farming, as well as substantial part time element". During his time, the proportion of part time farmers grew from 15% to 50%.

How did he keep so many different agendas — and occasional strong egos — on the one track?

A quick smile. "Ultimately, it is the force of rational argument and persuasion. We have always informed the debate with the facts. Over time, they (the council) develop a confidence that the leadership is well informed and has thought through the immediate and longer-term implications of the decision. Even if there is less than 100% enthusiasm for a particular decision, people will understand that on another day, when their agenda item

needs accommodation, they will get total support. We have also been fortunate in the calibre of people coming through."

He agrees with my suggestion that much of the job is "firefighting". However, he has "a strong philosophy that long term policy is always evolving despite the distractions that constantly arise".

Michael Berkery fought many battles but just kept coming back and mobilising the troops at the next battle site.

He made a difference and incoming general secretary Pat Smith knows that he has "big shoes to fill". He will miss it and will be missed. We probably have not seen the last of him.



## KEY IFA ACHIEVEMENTS DURING

- Super levy campaign (1983—1984): Ireland secured 20% extra, or 200m gallons annually. "That was worth €1.5bn over the lifetime of quota".
- Intensive political campaign of opposition to land tax (1986)
- Negotiated eight Social Partnership Agreements (since 1988). "The last Partnership Agreement achieved a 17% increase in REPS and a €1.2bn Government investment in 35,000 farmyards through the FWMS.
- "Partnership is neither a surrogate Government nor a substitute for Government action and management".

- MacSharry Reform (1992 to 1994): "Farmers reacted negatively to MacSharry shifting support away from production, but eventually his reform would form the basis of today's Single Farm Payment".
- Franz Fischler — Agenda 2000 (Reform agreed in 2003). "Led to full decoupling of CAP Support and today's Single Farm Payment. Despite being told it couldn't be done, it was agreed through our close relationship with Franz Fischler to allow consolidation of payments on owned land".
- WTO Doha Round (commenced 2001). "We didn't op-

- pose a balanced agreement but Mandelson's measures would have decimated the suckler herd and family farming in the west".
- Establishment of Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF) (1997). "It had a slow gestation but it has come good".
- Beef Blockade January (2000). "There was an issue of principle — where the factories doubled meat inspection levies and the IFA had to stand up to them. The blockade cost IFA £500,000 but, looking back, it was worth every penny".
- Live valuation for reactor

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## Suckler Beef Meeting in Kerry

**Where:** Rive Island Hotel, Castleisland **When:** Monday, 30th March 2009 @ 8pm

**Speakers:** Justin McCarthy, Irish Farmers Journal, Dr. Pat Mulvihill, Munster AI, Dr. Pat Donnellan, ICBF, John Shirley, ICBF, John A. Carroll, Teagasc

**Topic:** The top eight suckler beef farmers in the county have been identified, based on the ICBF Herd Plus data and the decisions of a judging panel.

Their breeding and management practices will be profiled at this meeting. A must attend event for serious suckler farmers.



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## Michael Berkery on . . . . .



ABOVE: A word in the ear of former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, also during an IFA AGM.

BELOW: With the current Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, at the IFA's 54th AGM.



### NEXT WEEK'S BUDGET

"Any significant increase in taxation would be a mistake. Ultimately, public sector pay and conditions and the numbers in the public service — the proliferation of institutions in the past 15 years when either their *raison d'être* or their contribution in the meantime is highly questionable — simply close them down.

"It's an emergency situation — the rules that applied at the time of their creation simply have to be suspended now".

### LOWERING THE COST BASE

"We are going to require risk capital to be invested in Ireland — that includes inward investment. The business of Government must be to restore the economy to a growth path as quickly as possible, avoiding the vicious cycle of unemployment and high taxes. We've been there before and it simply does not work for anyone."

### WHY SHOULD A FARMER JOIN IFA?

"The organisation will be as strong and as effective as membership participation. Many of the policy issues will impact upon his livelihood, or his family's livelihood, eventually.

"Through the IFA, he can collectively do many things that he cannot do as an individual.

"Take the example of fertilizers, where an IFA challenge to this year's prices yielded reductions of about

€70 per tonne. No group could do that alone, but collectively we could do that."

### MILK QUOTA ABOLITION

"We saw the restriction of quotas without the benefits of market supports as the worst of all worlds, so we aligned ourselves with the removal of quotas.

"I would describe the 'soft landing' that the Minister continually talks about as a complete misnomer. It was always going to be a hard landing, because Europe is 7% to 8% over-supplied in milk and that has to be disposed of. In the absence of export refunds, it is a very difficult environment".

### MILK PROCESSING

"The key issue is the competitiveness of processing and, in terms of the plcs, the share of the added value that is captured by the farmer as distinct from the investor.

"My big disappointment is that the €100m dairy investment fund proposed by IFA did not achieve its objective. My plan at the time was to use that public money, plus the resources of the Irish Dairy Board to link into the Irish milk pool and provide a major force in terms of resources, improved product range and a shift away from butter.

"It was an opportunity lost — overtaken by a general election and a Minister wishing to cut tapes in 13 different constituencies."

### THE VALUE OF IFA ELECTIONS

"It is a healthy democratic process. I know other groups

where a council or similar small group elects the President, he tends to become more a facilitator or a chairman of the board, rather than having the endorsement of a political mandate.

"When 85,000 members have a chance to vote, it is a huge mandate and legitimacy for the President."

"My major contribution was to ensure that immediately after the President is elected, the organisation binds itself together very quickly and there isn't an opposition and Government scenario.

### CAP FUNDING POST-2013

"Once the new Commission is in place later this year, the real debate will commence on funding for European agriculture post-2013.

"Obviously, the state of the general European economy is going to have a bearing on politicians' attitudes to maintaining the CAP budget. Already, most countries have moved towards a flat rate system, which has huge implications for Ireland in terms of re-distribution. The other challenge that will emerge this time around is the 10 new Member States, who had only just joined when the present regime was put in place. They are going to be looking for an increased share of the funds."

### IN HINDSIGHT, WOULD YOU HAVE HANDLED LISBON DIFFERENTLY?

"No, I certainly would not. The issue last time was not about Lisbon, it was about WTO and the disastrous deal that Mandelson was trying to

push through. Nobody in Government, or indeed anywhere else, put forward a single gain for the country, while we were able to quantify the losses in beef and milk export earnings at €2bn.

"It was unfortunate that it overlapped with the Lisbon Treaty. We asked the Taoiseach to declare a veto on a very bad deal — similar to what the French had got — and that took some time to secure. But the majority of farmers voted 'yes' to Lisbon. WTO is certainly off the agenda for the foreseeable future.

"Given the economic uncertainty and the negotiations on the payment regime post-2013, the IFA should take a lead at a very early stage and increase the majority of farmers who will vote 'yes' next time. This will leave no doubt in the non-farming minds of our intention to stay as close as possible to the centre of the action in Europe."

### BARRIERS TO EXPANSION

"The tax incentives for land leasing have not been anywhere near as effective as I would have expected them to be. I thought it was a great achievement to get them on the books and I'm disappointed that there hasn't been a better uptake. But it's understandable when you look at a person who already has a Single Farm Payment and REPS, the risk of putting that in any doubt is a huge deterrent.

"There should be no obstacles to a REPS farmer long term leasing another REPS farm, provided the REPS standards continue to be met on both holdings."

## BERKERY'S TENURE

animals (2001). "The failure to pay full market value was destroying dairy farmers whose herds had been depopulated after TB or Brucellosis. At least they now have transparency and an independent valuation".

• Brazilian beef ban (2008).

"The Brazilian beef ban has set down markers for equivalent standards to be applied to all food imports to the European Union."

• Dowling Report (2004). "Brought in new structures and procedures to modernise the organisation".



MAKING A POINT at an IFA AGM in the Irish Farm Centre with IFA President Pádraig Walshe and EU Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel.

## Squeeze more out of your grass

Producing and using grass efficiently to reduce costs and improve profits from dairy cows.

Speakers include:

- John Bryan (IFA) dairy market outlook
- Martin Kavanagh (Keenan Veterinary Director) managing the cow at grass
- Tom Nunan (Dairy Farmer) a farmers perspective
- Brian Reidy (Keenan Nutrition Manager) budgeting and complementing grass

Date

Venue

Wed 1st April

The Grand Hotel, Moate, Westmeath followed by meeting on Bellair Estate, Ballycumber

Thur 2nd April

Creighton Hotel, Clones, Monaghan followed by meeting on Hugo Maguires farm, Clones

All meetings start at 11:00am in the hotel (access to the farm is by coach only)

keenan  
True Technology

mech fiber

Please register to attend, phone Nicola 059-9771200 TODAY.

Cost is €25 (includes lunch & coach transfer).

