Farmers on the Move: The Strategic Mobilisation of the Farming Lobby in 1960s Ireland

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Abstract

This paper traces the origin, development and mobilisation of the farming lobby in 1960s Ireland. It constitutes part of the oral history of farming in Ireland and illustrates the early history of the Irish Farmers’ Association (IFA) from a time when there were few structures up until the 1980s when it stood as one of the most important and influential organisations in the country. Through personal experiences and a number of documented contemporary sources, this paper captures the lives of men and women who participated at this pivotal time.

Key words: Farming Lobby 1960s; Farming in Ireland; Farmers’ Rights March; National Farmers’ Association (NFA); Irish Farmers’ Association (IFA); Irish Oral History.

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Farmers on the Move: The Strategic Mobilisation of the Farming Lobby in 1960s Ireland

By Ann M. Gibbons

To get back to the beginning, it is a long story with a great many disappointments along the way. Initially, Irish farmers could not form any kind of effective organisation until they got secure titles to their lands. At the end of the 19th century Ireland had no structured rural society. The vast majority of the population belonged to no association except to the family and the Church. The agriculture societies that were formed represented the interests of the landlords. At this time Irish agriculture had no social structure, no political power, no marketing organisation. It was under capitalised and relatively unskilled. The first generation of farmer owners were around for the foundation of the cooperatives, the Department of Agriculture and on to the political independence period. On the formation of the National Farmers’ Association in the Four Provinces ballroom in Dublin on January 6th 1955, the Organisation from which it had sprung: Macra na Feirme (a young farmers’ association) - ceded its political role and reverted to being a social and educational body. The Irish Farmers Journal had already been set up as the official organ of Macra na Feirme. Without the Farmers Journal the developments of the 1960s would never have been possible. All farmers

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1 This paper was first delivered as a broadcast on Radio Kilkenny in May 2000.

2 Ann Mary Gibbons is an honorary life member of the Irish Farmers’ Association (IFA), having been an active participant in the 1960s farming mobilisation. Mrs. Gibbons was elected National Chair of the IFA Farm Family Committee. She served as a Board member of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions; on the board of the Southern Regional Fisheries Board; and she serves on the National Council of An Taisce – the National Trust for Ireland. She survives Michael Gibbons, one of the nine men who sat on the street outside the Department of Agriculture for 21 days in 1966. Mrs. Gibbons lives in Kilkenny.
were welcomed into the National Farmers’ Association (NFA)\(^3\). The organisation was non-sectarian and non-party political. In previous attempts to set up a farmers’ lobby group, the involvement of party political representatives had invariably been divisive, so elected politicians were excluded from holding officer roles in the NFA.

The aims of the National Farmers’ Association were simple. It sought to secure six basic rights for its members: i) the right to recognition of their place in society; ii) the right to control their own industry; iii) the right to negotiate with Government on behalf of their industry; iv) farmer controlled marketing boards; v) price stability; and vi) income on a par with non agricultural sectors. In 1955, the NFA tried to build a power base to gain the right to consultation and representation. For the first ten years of its existence the NFA concentrated on the technical progress. Over the eight years from 1955, there was growing discontent among Irish farmers. They constantly argued but in vain that their produce was their wages and that their negotiating positions should be as strong as that of unions. County representatives within NFA were calling for more aggressive action. Frustrated in their efforts, agitation escalated in the second half of the 1960s. The Rates\(^4\) increase in Kilkenny over this period of eight years increased by almost almost half and continued to rise. The motivations of the farmer agitation in the 1960s was not a fundamental question of higher prices or subsidies on production. The climate of the time was that all knowledge rested with the Department of State. The Department of Agriculture certainly believed this. Farmers were tired of

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\(^3\) The National Farmers’ Association (NFA) was founded in 1955. In 1971, the NFA merged with a number of other organisations representing specific agricultural sectors, including beet growers, horticulture, and fresh milk producers, in order to form the Irish Farmers’ Association (IFA). The IFA maintains twelve regional offices in Ireland and an office in Brussels (www.ifa.ie).

\(^4\) Rates were a form of taxation on land.
being talked down to. A new attitude to the problems of agriculture was needed. The scene had to be set for a change of attitude.

Unrest increased in the autumn of 1966, when despite a sharp fall in income, taxation continued to increase. The Taoiseach, Mr Lemass, acknowledged the special position of the NFA before he left office. Minister Charles Haughey assured the NFA of close co-operation from the Government. However, non-productive negotiations and on-going broken promises led to increased farmer anger. The crunch came at the NFA Annual General Meeting (AGM) in 1966. The NFA President, Rickard Deasy, launched a full attack on the Minister. “In the past thirteen months we have seen Minister Haughey rushing from one expedient to another, shying away from key decisions on fundamental issues”, he said, citing many examples. Department reaction was swift. All contact with the NFA was cancelled, a stalemate was reached. When eventually the NFA Grain Committee arranged a Department meeting with officials, it was cancelled when it emerged that Deasy was to attend. Fruitful discussions however, were held with other Government agencies by the NFA. In spite of all the demonstrations, protests and other activities of the previous years, the Government misjudged the situation. They believed that Deasy spoke only as the leader of a small ambitious group. In fact, he clearly voiced a general discontent of farmers. Pressure from grass root branches and executives was extreme. In fact they regarded the line from NFA headquarters as too soft. At this time, the Agriculture Institute had a survey published and it estimated that 100,000 Irish farmers had family incomes below £5 a week. Labour leaders at this time considered £10 a week to be less than a living wage. This is 1966, wages: £5 a week.
The British Market could not absorb the extra 200,000 Irish cattle now available for export. This was as a response to the Government’s programme for economic expansion. An NFA demand for a meat marketing board had been ignored. On top of this, the wet harvest of 1966 had been more suitable for growing rice than corn. Credit was not available to buy fodder needed to hold on to livestock. It was an explosive situation. A decision was taken to stage a farmers’ rights march. Intensive organisation was carried out over a seven week period. Statements of the issues in dispute were publicised. The march would be a huge undertaking. Routes were identified and agreed with local Gardai. The Army advised on the prudent duration of a day’s walk. The march would start from Bantry Town in county Cork on October 7th 1966.

The local fair was being held on the square in Bantry, as the sixteen chosen men under Sean O’ Brien lined up for the 217 miles trek to Dublin. They were led by the NFA President, Rickard Deasy and blessed by the Roman Catholic Parish Priest and by the Church of Ireland Rector at Bantry. The campaign was placed under the protection of the late Pope John, the man who had first used his authority to speak up for the rights of farmers. Similar groups left every county in Ireland at the same time to arrive in Dublin eleven days later, on October the 19th 1966. The enthusiasm for the march can best be illustrated by some personal examples. Robert Wilson, aged 78, from Monaghan insisted on marching. Jimmy Guest left his new bride to lead the Tipperary group. Pádraig Pearse, a teenager from Ballybunion marched on his way to the emigration boat. Hugh Leddy who farmed twenty seven Leitrim acres was the largest small farmer weighing nineteen stone. They would walk fifteen miles each day. Everyday on the road brought them problems. The first day it was blisters, stiffness the next day, then
muscles started to tire and when all seemed well a variety of cramps and similar troubles presented. A supply of fresh socks and foot baths were a necessity. The entire motley group was a highly disciplined group. The sheer efficiency of the whole operation was amazing. It would have done credit to an army. It was a silent march. Helpers along the way provided accommodation, food and care for blistered feet. Miles of sticking plasters were applied to weary feet. A colly dog joined the Cavan group and became its self-appointed mascot, walking the whole way from Cavan to Dublin. The camaraderie on the road was wonderful. A young Cork man who had already walked 117 miles from Bantry began to lift one leg high and kick with it every few steps. A Kerry colleague consoled him by saying, “We had a horse that did that thing once; we called it string halt, I’d hate to tell you what we had to do with him”. Valerie Harte from Nenagh mounted on her cobb, led the southern column across the Curragh.

A Garda motor cyclist looks on as the Kilkenny marchers led by Tom Neary pass near Naas. Source: The Irish Farmers Journal. 18 October 1966.
The counties were Cork, Laois, Clare, Tipperary, Kerry and Kildare. They walked from north, south, east and west, through heat, cold, wind and rain. It was October-winter of 1966. The Kilkenny contingent, under the leadership of Tom Neary of Keatingstown wore black and amber armlets. They assembled at Loughboy on the Waterford Road, where Miss Costello and her helpers provided refreshments.

The members of the Kilkenny team were: L. Fitzpatrick, Gathabawn; J. Walsh, Mulinavat; John Byrne, Danesfort; Charlie Cummins, Ballyhale; Dan Gory, Kells; Edward Walsh, Danesfort; Sean Murphy, Three Castles; Rory O’Gorman, Kells; Ciaran Brennan, Conahy; J. Staunton, Ballyragget; W. Brophy, Ballyragget; W. Bolger, Callan; Paddy Kennedy, Kilmanagh; Paddy Moore, Clara; Richard Cody, Glenmore; R. Doherty, Glenmore; R. Maddock, Mulinavat; Tom Maloney, Warrington, Kilkenny. Gowran Branch, NFA, provided food and shelter at the parochial hall.

The group moved on to Garryduff in Paulstown and met the Waterford contingent. The Kilkenny People of October the 14th carried a large notice giving special train times from Thomastown to Dublin return. This was a train which went to Dublin for the meeting at Merrion Street on October the 19th 1966. This was at the culmination of the protest march. The train was to depart at 7.40 am it cost 23 shillings, calling at Kilkenny, Bagnelstown and Carlow. It arrived in Dublin at 9.50 am. Two hours and ten minutes in 1966. It left Dublin for the return journey at 7.45 pm. At Urlingford, North Kilkenny members from NFA branches travelled to Fenner. The branches represented were Glengoole, Gortnahoe Ballyragget, Lisdowney, Tullaroan, Urlingford and Gathabawn. It was estimated at this time that 200,000 people around Ireland were
actively involved with the march. The people on the road stayed at five assembly points on the outskirts of Dublin. Some had walked 217 miles, others between 100 and 200 miles. Others joined at the counties bordering Dublin. All with the same determination, to make a firm stand for the future of farming in Ireland. Almost all the marchers carried a little bundle under their arm. It was a curious little bundle. It contained a coat or a jacket or something for the cold or the rain. Most of today’s convenience clothing were not available in the ‘60s Ireland. The more than 400 marchers were joined by thirty thousand people when they started the march from Parnell Square to Merrion Street in Dublin.

The Kerryman newspaper of that day commented, “It takes widespread and deep discontent to send men off on a mission of bringing their grievances on foot to the capital of their country”.

The Parade through Dublin stretched for more than one mile at any given point. One lone bag piper from Limerick preceded the march. The only other sound was the tread of thousands upon thousands of marching feet. The citizens of Dublin clapped loudly. Silence dominated the march. Rickard Deasy, NFA President, addressed the meeting. The declaration of farmers’ rights was read. At an arranged time, a chosen delegation of nine men left the meeting and walked behind the barricades which were manned by a large force of Gardai, walked towards the offices of the Minister for Agriculture. The atmosphere was very tense, with more than thirty thousand pairs of eyes following them. They were met on the steps of the Department of Agriculture by
the Secretary to the Minister. The essence of his greeting to the men, who had walked from the far reaches of Ireland, was “Thus far shall you go”.

The moment of decision had arrived. The nine men then sat on the wet steps to wait. The day was Wednesday, October 19th 1966. The time was 4pm. There was near open revolt when the meeting was informed that the Minister was not available to their delegation. A taped message from the NFA President was relayed to the meeting. It said, “there must be no violence”. Thirty thousand people filed silently away. They went home silently as they had come, by train, bus, car and the walkers. The nine men stayed on the steps.

The nine men delegation were Rickard Deasy and Michael Gibbons, two former Irish Army officers, while five others T.J. Maher, Sean Holland, Jim Bergin, Hugh Leddy, and Tom Cahill had served in the local defence forces. Joe Dunphy was from Sligo and Bob Stack who was the eldest of the group, he had served in the War of Independence and also had six All Ireland Football medals.
The first night in the open was spent on the steps of the Department of Agriculture. The nine men intended to stay until the Minister received them. It was not a picket. They were waiting to be received. Before 7 am the following morning, a group of Gardai arrived and asked the delegation to leave. They declined. The nine were then lifted bodily and placed on the pavement. They sat in the gutter, in the open, for twenty one days and twenty one nights through October into November in the Irish winter of 1966. Groups of farmers from every county kept vigil with the delegation for the entire duration of their stay in the gutter. An early visitor to the pavement was Cecil Woodham-Smith, author of the book “The Great Hunger”. She expressed personal sympathy with the objectives and admiration for their firm stand. She emphasised the close parallel between the circumstances of the moment and the circumstances of the famine years on which she based her book. The Civil Service and authorities both at
Westminster and Dublin, during the famine years, were unaware of the true conditions of the country and the people.

Reverend Doctor Michael Hartey was constantly with the delegation. He later became Bishop of Killaloe. Another caller was Máire McSweeney, sister of Terence McSweeney, Lord Mayor of Cork, who died on hunger strike during the War of Independence. The sit down location on the street became known as Check Point Charlie, from the Berlin Wall escape point and is a pun on the name of the Minister of Agriculture “Charlie” Hanghey. Survival suits arrived from the Canadian Federated Farmers. Messages of support came from farming organisations worldwide. Meals and hot water bottles were supplied from the Gresham Hotel, the manager there was a woman from County Clare, and from local sympathising restaurants.

Negotiations took place with the Taoiseach Lemass and Haughey before Lemass retired. These negotiations were to have no pre-conditions. A new Taoiseach was elected, Jack Lynch. Charles Haughey moved to Finance and Neil Blaney got Agriculture. Promises were broken. The deadlock was eventually broken after twenty one days and twenty one nights. When the delegation entered the Department of Agriculture for a meeting, the wives of the nine men occupied the chairs in their absence. I was one of that group. The seven other wives were Mary Bergin, Sheila Deasy, Betty Dunphy, Eileen Holland, Patricia Leddy, Betty Maher, and Mary Stack. (Tom Cahill was single).
December 1966, more broken promises. Farm machinery protests saw seventy five thousand farmers and fifteen thousand vehicles involved blocking roads and bridges. Farmers were arrested for picketing Rates office. Some were charged with traffic obstruction. Two hundred were put in jail in Mountjoy and Limerick. The first man into Mountjoy jail was Patrick Cunniff of Roscommon. He farmed thirty acres in Roscommon. Commodity strikes followed in March. Peace seemed on the horizon after the budget of 1967. Farmers were released from jail. Deasy said let bygones be bygones. Talks were to start. The NFA Council would meet on April 28th 1967. The Rates go-slow would be called off. Unexpectedly, two farmers from county Clare were jailed for refusing to sign bail bonds relating to the commodity strike. This was the day before the meeting of NFA with Taoiseach Jack Lynch and Minster Neil Blaney. Kevin Boland,
Minister of Local Government had threatened a prosecution and property seizures for non-payment of Rates.

On the 24th April 1967 the Government took action. There was an early morning raid by Army and Gardai at Gibbons home at Bonnetsrath on the Glendine Road just outside Kilkenny. Two hundred Police and fifty trucks of military personnel came to assist the sheriff to seize property, also the special branch were present. No resistance was given. It was only parents and ten young children in the house. It looked like a place of siege. Nine other properties were seized. At Jim Mullins of Duninga, Goresbridge; Tom Comerford Pidgeon Park, Danesfort; Michael Dillon, Tullaroan; Patrick Purcell, Kilmanagh; William Brennan, Kilmanagh; Edward O’Brien, Windgap; Charles Cummins, Stoneyford.

Michael and Ann Gibbons and family at Bonnetsrath, Kilkenny after their property had been seized from their farm for non-payment of Rates. 
On that evening of the seizures, the Taoiseach Jack Lynch went on television and threatened the NFA with proscription, that is, as an illegal organisation. He said that they had gone past the point of no return, that they had threatened to usurp the powers of Government. The transition to normality came in 1969. T.J. Maher, NFA President, met Jack Lynch, the Taoiseach. The Government were prepared to recognise NFA from the point of view of consultation and negotiation. Minister for Agriculture Neil Blaney lifted the ban on advertising in the Irish Farmers Journal. NFA was invited by the Taoiseach to contribute to the third Programme for Economic Expansion. Charles Haughey and Neil Blaney were dismissed from cabinet for reasons not associated with agriculture. James Gibbons, brother of Michael Gibbons, a founder member of the NFA, was appointed the new Minister for Agriculture.

Like most wars, this dispute should never had happened. It involved an estimated two hundred thousand farmers and family members in demonstrations, seizures, jailing of two hundred people and on-going protests. It was a “civil war” at a moment of national crisis. The Government established what had never been questioned, its right to govern. The NFA position was consolidated. The position at the time was summed up by the saying that there are three most powerful organisations in Ireland, the Catholic Church, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the National Farmers’ Association. Only the National Farmers’ Association can demand to see the Taoiseach at will. The most serious consequence of the five year disruption was the cessation of preparations for Ireland’s entry into the Common Market in 1973.
It is important that we treasure the right to negotiate with Government on behalf of our agricultural industry, a right that did not always exist and which was not easily won. July 23rd 1982 was a red letter day. A group of Wexford farmers took a case to the Supreme Court to test the constitutionality of Rates. They won. The stand taken on Rates by the NFA had finally been vindicated.

Acknowledgements
I dedicate this paper to the nine men and the seven other women who sat with me outside the Department of Agriculture in 1966. My thanks to Professor Louis Smith, formerly of University College Dublin; and the late Sean Healy, General Secretary of the NFA.