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Full proceedings may be found at www.gmfreeireland.org/conference

BRODY SWEENEY • Speech

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Brody Sweeney is the CEO of O'Briens Sandwich Bars - www.obriens.ie.

He plans to run for election as a Fine Gael TD in 2007.

This is the transcript of a video recording of Brody's speech, slightly edited for clarity.

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Note: The first few seconds of Brody's speech are missing, during which he begins to give an account of closing a sales deal with a woman who called up to order sandwiches for her husband's funeral.

... And I said to the lady, "Would you like these sandwiches delivered tomorrow morning or tomorrow afternoon?" That was the closing question on which she had to make her decision: "Would you like them delivered tomorrow morning or tomorrow afternoon?" And she said to me: "Oh no no no! He's not dead yet!"

Now the reason I tell you that story is because that lady is very strong on forward planning. And I just feel that in the direction of the Irish food business, there is no forward planning at the moment.

What I want to talk to you about this afternoon, in the few minutes that I have with you, is some ideas around the future planning of our food business. Because I am passionate about Irish food, and about how we make it, and sell it, and what we're doing with it.

My company is called O'Briens Sandwich Bars. I started it eighteen years ago. It's about 350 outlets in 12 countries around the world, and this year we spent about €25 million on Irish food. And I'm really passionate about it.

What I've been doing over the past eighteen years – like Vincent [Cleary, of Glenisk Organic Ireland] – is to become excellent at what we do. We sell sandwiches and coffees; it's pretty simple, but we try to do the best we possibly can. We're not that good at it yet, but we're better than a lot of other people.

Arising out of that obviously I have a great interest in Irish food culture and what we do with it. And I decided a couple of years ago that when I hit my forties I was going to do something different, and last year I decided to get into politics. And I'm actually standing for Fine Gael next year, whenever the election is, for election as a TD [Member of the Irish Parliament].

One of the two main reasons I'm doing it is because I really care where we're going with our country and with our food and what's happening with it.

What I've done is a small presentation. It's called "Project Green" to make it sound exciting and zippy, and I'm going to take you through it, and I'd love to get your feedback on it: it's a business development strategy for rural Ireland.

Now why do we need something like this? I have to say that I'm coming at this from a business perspective, not specifically on GMOs, although GMOs play very much a part in it, and we'll see how that fits in.

Did you know that one company, one company based in Ireland accounts for 6% of all Irish exports? Did you know that? One company! Do you know what company that is? Microsoft. Microsoft, on its own, has six per cent of all Irish exports. I think that is a truly frightening statistic .

If you took Microsoft and Dell and Pfizer and Intel, and they decided they didn't want to be in Ireland any more, our Celtic Tiger is gone! Actually vamoosed, and all the bits that go with it. And I think that's an incredibly frightening statistic.

Thirty or forty years ago, there was a civil servant called Ken Whittaker and a Taoiseach called Sean Lemass. They had a vision of where Ireland should be in 30 or 40 years' time, and they dreamed about attracting all this Foreign Direct Investment in, and turning Ireland into a knowledge economy and becoming high-tech. And you know, to a large extent their vision has been realized. And that has delivered our Celtic Tiger now.

But if we look out in thirty or forty years' time at what sort of Ireland we're going to live in then, or want to live in, well for sure we're not going to be depending on Foreign Direct Investment for our economic success. At least that's my view of it. We're not going to be depending on, or we can't depend on foreign companies based overseas for our economic growth. We've got to get our domestic acts together. We've got to get our indigenous business going.

We can't depend on foreign companies based overseas for our economic growth. We've got to get our domestic acts together. We've got to get our indigenous business going.

So I think today's high peg multinationals are gone. We have an economy based on foreign exports which makes us very vulnerable. Small-scale agriculture and food production is in decline. One of the things that just doesn't make sense to me about our rural development policy particularly is that we've had this drive over the past couple of years to become one of the lowest-cost producers of commodity products, of casein or whey or meat or whatever. And

how do you do that in a country with fecking little farms and high labour costs? It just doesn't make sense! How do Irish farmers compete seriously with a farmer in Poland who has a ten thousand acre flat square, where labour is eight or nine thousand Euro a year? How do you compete with that? You can't compete with that!

Yet that has been the whole basis on which our agriculture has been developed over the last number of years. Our food processing is exactly the same. We've become one of the lowest cost producers of bulk products; the little guys are disappearing; the butchers are gone from our rural town, and the bakers, the abattoirs – all gone in the drive for scale, mass-production, lowest-cost producers. And to my mind the government kind of ignores our traditional industries in favour of all this knowledge economy stuff.

Here's an interesting slide to give you an idea of how this Celtic Tiger makes us so vulnerable. The little blue lines are all the foreign companies bases in Ireland, and it shows the growth of exports. The little green ones are all the Irish-owned companies. And you can see that if we hadn't had these Foreign Direct Investment companies, Irish industry really hasn't been in any great shape over the last couple of years, in fact it's been a more-or-less flat line – it hasn't grown at all. We certainly wouldn't be having any Celtic Tiger economy.

All our effort has been to do with the blue stuff, and – to my mind – we've just ignored the green stuff. That's why we need to do something differently.

So just to take some different issues around this. Small farms are the norm in Ireland, not big farms. The drive has been as I said toward commodities and mass production, which don't really work, to my mind, on small farms with high labour costs. There is a very doubtful future for small farmers, off-farm rural work, never mind the lifestyle choices you have to make. So people who want to farm, can't farm full-time at the moment because there is no economic rationale for it.

That has the double effect of having rural communities in decline, and everybody wanting to move to the big cities. If you work in Dublin and have to commute from Mullingar or Navan or Arklow, it's not great fun! And that's partly because of the move to the big cities. But it means that the Navans and the Arklows and the Mullingars are pretty empty places during the week. Not great fun!

Second for food processing, scale and muscle are essential, as we know. Kerry Foods and the big co-ops are becoming the models for the food business. Most of the core markets are controlled by the supermarkets, so it's incredibly difficult for someone like Vincent and Glenisk to get in and make an impact, and it also makes you very vulnerable as a business because if Tesco decides they don't want to do Glenisk, they want to do their own brand tomorrow, it has a very very serious impact on the business.

The small guys are gone. Local abattoirs, butchers, bakers, dairies, greengrocers, all that's gone in the drive to bigger scale.

Much higher values are being placed on things like ethical production, organics, GMO-free, or craft or natural products – as Glenisk is showing

But very interestingly, the middle class reaction is gathering pace, and much higher values are being placed on things like ethical production, organics, GMO-free, or craft or natural products – as Glenisk is showing – because this is feeding entirely into that market.

And small-scale rural tourism, which is all linked to this in my mind, if you're looking at the development of rural Ireland: we have the reputation for being very expensive, we have the weather – there's not a whole lot we can do about it, it's just the way it is. I don't think the reality often matches the ads: you know, traditional Irish hospitality in our B&Bs, and you go in and you can't get served by anybody who's ever been born in Ireland. You're met at the door by someone who is Polish, have your breakfast cooked by someone who is Latvian –

nothing wrong with them, but it doesn't exactly re-enforce the message we're selling. It's very Dublin-focused, as we know. Budget hotels and knocking the B&Bs out of business because for the same price you get the facilities of a modern hotel. And of course, what is it that we sell in Ireland? We've got so many mixed messages, we're not really defined by anything.

So looking at those three areas of rural life: small-scale farming, food production, and tourism – what can we do?

We want to keep our foreign investments that are creating jobs because they keep the economy rocking along. And we want to keep – at least for the moment – our commodity farming and food production.

But I think we should be putting more effort into things we used to be good at, and we used to be good at making food. So small-scale farming, food production and tourism: trying to get higher added value, to get higher price for it.

And you know there is a fantastic opportunity at the moment, I feel, in Europe. We have a very sophisticated niche market where people are cash-rich and time-poor. Plenty of money. Becoming ever more health-conscious. This opportunity wasn't there ten years ago because people didn't care as much about obesity, or traceability, or GMO, or whether something was organic, or traceable. People didn't care. But they do care now, and that's right around Europe.

And you know, there is not one country that has taken that market opportunity and exploited it. There is not one country that is defined as the country where you get all this stuff from. So the supply is all very fine, but there is no one country that said, "We are the absolute top quality food producers for Europe.

There is a fantastic opportunity for Ireland to become Europe's benchmark country for quality natural foods and tourism.

We are going to be the guys with the GMO-free environment, where we're going to have more organic, where our food is going to be traceable, where we are really going to care and believe in what we say about our food." And I think that's the opportunity for Ireland to be that country. Nobody has done it yet. I think it's just a fantastic opportunity for Ireland to be that country.

To market it as the benchmark country for quality natural foods and tourism, we could exploit this market opportunity by building a brand – a new brand that develops a wide range of Irish food products. You can sell a lot of stuff under it, and it keeps our produce away from the hands of supermarkets, and being at the diktat of them. It gives small producers and farmers a big brand which they can market, and market a tourism experience which is something different from what all the other guys are doing. And it defines all these things that we think are important in this room.

So I think the idea of setting up a new brand – we are very good I think in Ireland at producing stuff. We are good farmers, we are good food producers, we are good at that side. We are crap at selling it, with the greatest respect. We are not terribly good at selling the stuff. So I think the producers are there; people will make the stuff if they can sell it. At the moment they can't sell it, at least not efficiently, because it gets into the hands of the supermarkets, and supermarkets drive the premium off the price, and you might as well not bother trying.

And I think that's been the experience for a lot of organic farmers, for example. They go down the organic route, with all the trouble it involves, and then it gets into the hands of supermarkets, and the supermarkets drive the premium off the price and then it's not worthwhile. Why would you bother if you can't make anything out of it?

So I've got this idea. I've called it Project Green – it's just a working title – to develop a new brand through franchised producers markets. What I want to talk to you about just now is

some ideas, because I think ideas are great and theory is a fine thing, but what do we actually do about it? And if I've had any experience of anything, it's being a marketer and building up a brand, as I have done with O'Briens. So I have an idea, I call it Project Green until we dream up a proper name for this new brand, and I want to talk about some ideas about how we could actually get that to help farmers and food producers to sell their produce.

I want to develop a new brand to give small food producers an engine through which they can sell their produce in a way that works for them.

We know it's very difficult for small producers to achieve critical mass. A lot of them don't want to anyway, for lifestyle reasons, they want to keep their businesses small. What I want to do with this new brand is to use that for small producers to give them an engine through which they can sell their produce, and to set it up in a way that works for them.

Small-scale food processors would get some security. So, for example, if you go down the organic route and it takes a number of years to make sure your land is clean and satisfies the organic food standards, that you will be able to sell your produce at the end of that period. So this brand would contract to pay farmers in advance, before they went down that route.

We want to identify food products through the brand that would be ecological, and sensible and small-scale. And we could grant-aid, through the brand, start-ups of food processing, or indeed expansion of farms, in rural areas.

One idea I have for actually selling the stuff is through branded farmers markets. I think farmers markets are a very interesting development, because they are pure consumer led! They are actually people voting with their feet and saying, "We want to buy this stuff." It's not Bord Bia [the Irish Food Board] or central organisations deciding that farmers markets are a good way to sell our food. It's consumers voting with their feet. And they've been springing up all over the country. I think there is a great opportunity to expand farmers markets, Irish branded farmers markets, into the UK.

I've had some experience in setting one up in Howth, in Dublin. It's been just fantastically successful. It's about eight or nine months old. I think we could professionalise that and give Irish food producers, better primary producers – people in farms or indeed food processors – a much better opportunity to sell their stuff and sell it consistently. So I have this idea of actually franchising out branded farmers markets with operators, where you would go and pay your fee and it would be done terribly professionally. And we would do more of them in Ireland, and more through the UK as well.

Another idea is branded Internet distribution. And just to move on for a second, some of you might be familiar with web sites like this: this is a UK web site, Sheepdrove Organic Shop [www.sheepdroveshop.com] where they sell organic meat. You'd want to see the price they're getting for meat on that site – my God, it would warm the cockles of your heart if you were in the meat production business! It's just fantastic. It's a way of by-passing supermarkets and getting the product direct to consumers, and for the producer and distributor to keep most of the margins. So my idea is to set up, again under the same brand as the farmers markets, a branded Internet distribution business.

For example I've had some talks with Donegal Creameries in the North West of Ireland, about them being given the franchise to distribute over the Internet, products in the greater Dublin area. In the Donegal creamery area they have I think about 800 farmers who trade under that co-op banner. So Donegal Creameries would act as the middleman, buy the produce, pick it and pack it and arrange to distribute it in Dublin. Donegal Creameries would operate the web site for the Dublin markets, take the orders in, collect the money and get the full retail whack out of it, which is really important. And you completely by-pass the supermarket distribution model.

One of those Internet distribution hubs could be set up for all the big cities in the UK. Logistics mean it really wouldn't be an issue. The way the Sheepdrove one works is you log on to the

site on a Monday and Tuesday, you pick your products and pay with your credit card; and on Thursday and Friday that's delivered by FedEx to your house in a polystyrene refrigerated box. The thought of doing that from Donegal into Manchester is completely feasible, or from Wexford into Leeds – it's completely feasible as an idea. While they concentrate on meat, you can imagine a whole range from yoghurt to fruit and vegetables, ready-meals, all done the same way: keeping the stuff away from the hands of the supermarkets.

And then, feeding into the last leg of this rural economy, is the tourism. I think it's fair to say that our rural tourism is in trouble, and for the reasons we've identified – the budget hotels are about the same price as the B&Bs but they have all the facilities.

I'm the father of four small children in Dublin. And it's almost like a rite of passage with the fathers and mothers in my school, that you take the kids to Euro-Disney. Anybody take their children to Euro-Disney?

Frank Corcoran: Yes, I had to!

Brody Sweeney: You had to – I'm the same!

Frank Corcoran: I'm away at environmental meetings so often that I have to make up for it...

Brody Sweeney: Four days: it costs about €5,000 euro. I couldn't think of a worse place to spend four days. I couldn't honestly think of a worse place. Thirteen million visitors go to Euro-Disney every year. Thirteen million!

So I thought, God, if we could do a bit of that! So what about the idea of doing family farming holidays? Why do so many parents take their kids to Euro-Disney? One of the defining things about modern parents is we are all guilty, far too guilty, because we think we don't spend enough time with our kids. So we go to Euro-Disney, get the photos taken, it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, we'll have actually looked after our kids properly. It's about being cash-rich and time-poor.

But what about the idea of taking some of those same families that go to Euro-Disney, and bringing them to Ireland for a family farming holiday? Where we don't sell a room in a farmhouse, but we sell an experience, like they do in Euro-Disney.

What about taking some of those families that go to Euro-Disney, and bringing them to Ireland for a family farming holiday? Where we sell an experience.

Imagine little Franz and Helga coming with their mum and dad from Germany for their holiday in Ireland. They come for five days and they stay in a B&B, they stay on a farm, and on Monday little Helga learns how to bake soda bread with her mum, and little Franz is out with his dad and they go out with the farmer tossing hay in the field, and on Monday night they go to a Céilí [traditional Irish music session]. And on Tuesday morning they go horse-riding, and little Helga milks a cow, and little Franz learns how to do... whatever. But the idea of rather than just selling them a room for the night, you take that family and you give them an experience. Now who wouldn't buy into this healthy rural experience, quality time with your family, relieving all that incredible guilt complex that you have?

Now thirteen million are going to Paris every year, to Euro-Disney. If we get one million of those, just one of the thirteen million, it would make an unbelievable industry in Ireland. And an industry where we're not selling a room and getting 400 euro a week, you're getting 4,000 euro a week by making the whole thing into an experience. If you are paying that to Euro-Disney it's the same thing, you are relieving the guilt, you're getting after those cash-rich and time-poor people, and wouldn't that be a much more authentic and real experience? And you don't need all of them: just one million, one million and we'd have a fantastic industry. And to do it on the back of our food heritage, so that you would do little things like Middleton – proud home of Ballymaloe Relish, giving the people of Middleton them something to be proud of, and make tourism experiences as other people do in Disneyland.

The fourth leg I have is the idea of an Irish-branded retail outlet. I know we've tried these before, and some of them haven't done terribly well, selling Bainín sweaters and Connemara marble.

But an Irish-branded food outlet, an Irish-themed food outlet – we're already doing a lot of them very successfully. If you've been to Dublin, you will be familiar with Donnybrook Fair. Have any of you been there? It's a fantastic shop. There's a new one called Fallon & Byrne which opened up in central Dublin there. They are like big food halls, but they focus on Irish food. If you go in to Fallon & Byrne, they've got an Irish bakery section, an Irish vegetable section, an Irish cheese section, an Irish fish section. It's absolutely fantastic and they've got a beautiful café up on the top floor. Why don't we set up a chain of those throughout the UK, which would sell the very best of Irish food, under the same brand as our farmers markets, and our Internet distribution, and our family farming holidays?

The efficiencies we would get from putting the money into the one brand, and marketing Ireland under that one brand, would be fantastic. It would mean that anybody in this room who is in a business place in rural Ireland could take part in it, with the wellie of a really serious brand behind you – an Irish Disneyland; well I'm not saying Disneyland, but you know what I mean.

So I just think it's a kind of a no-brainer. We've got to find a foil to Foreign Direct Investment as I think it's going to dry up.

Ireland could be a GMO-free country where the rural economy is alive and thriving, where the best elements of our rural life are preserved and even enhanced better than they are now.

And if we're looking into the Ireland of twenty or thirty years' time, wouldn't we like to live in a country where the rural economy was alive and thriving, wouldn't we like to live in a GMO-free country, wouldn't we like to live in a country where the best elements of our rural life were preserved and even enhanced, much better than they were now?

But there's a business imperative around it. It's not just to be altruistic, not just to be nice, or wouldn't it be pretty – but because there's a solid business reason behind it.

That's all I have to say. Thank you very much.