

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE GREEN IRELAND CONFERENCE

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Full proceedings may be found at [www.gmfreeireland.org/conference](http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference)

## EDDIE PUNCH • Speech

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Eddie Punch is the General Secretary of the Irish Cattle and Sheepfarmers Association (ICSA), representing 10,000 farmers.

ICSA is the first Irish conventional farmers group with a clearly defined policy to conserve Ireland's GM-free farming status.

Eddie's speech should be mandatory reading for all Irish farmers and food producers concerned about the competitive advantage of Ireland's green image, and the undemocratic way that farm policies are being determined by bureaucrats in the European Commission and the World Trade Organisation.

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

Footnote references may be found on page 7.

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**T**hanks very much Michael. It's a great pleasure to be here today to talk to you. As Michael has said, we have – as the Irish Cattle and Sheepfarmers Association – taken a particular position on this GM question, and to state it simply, it is that the Irish Cattle and Sheepfarmers Association is opposed to the use of GM production methods in Irish agriculture.

We've come to this position not necessarily because of scientific beliefs or ideological opposition to genetic modification. To be quite honest about it, we see it as a pragmatic response to the future for agriculture in this country.

And by that I mean that if Ireland is to have a future in farming, then it must be based on utilizing the clean green image of the island – and using that as a means of selling product to the discerning consumers of Europe, and perhaps further afield, who are interested and who want a choice as to what kind of food they eat and what kind of methods are used in the production of that food.

**if Ireland is to have a future in farming, it must be based on utilizing the clean green image of the island as a means of selling product to the discerning consumers of Europe.**

Earlier this week I was in Strasbourg, as part of a delegation that met Mariann Fischer-Boel, the EU Commissioner for Agriculture. The discussion was in relation to the WTO. And it was very forcibly brought home to me that the European Commission is Hell-bound in doing a deal at WTO. And I think that the outcome of that deal will be hugely disadvantageous to Irish farmers. I believe that the European Commission negotiator, Peter Mandelson, will exceed the mandate that he has already been given by the European Council of Ministers, and that a deal will be done at all costs. Because it is quite clear to me that the pre-occupation of the European Commission at the moment is with getting access to emerging markets in Brazil, India and so on, for industrial and technological goods. And that is the driving factor that will decide what happens.

Now the relevance of this to our discussion today is, in the first case, that it means that Irish farmers will have the task of farming in competition with producers from Brazil, India, New Zealand, Australia, and so on.

And while many NGOs see this as a positive development, in terms of, for example, helping developing nations, I think that this is short-sighted and doesn't understand the complexity of farming structures, for example in Brazil, where we understand that thirty seven individuals predominantly control Brazilian beef production. Where we understand that many of the people who actually do the work in Brazilian beef production are little better than slaves. Slave is perhaps the wrong word if you understand it in terms of chains, but if you imagine someone dropped out to a farm hundreds upon hundreds of miles from the nearest village or town and left there, that's not far off slavery. And that's what is happening in Brazilian beef production.

And rainforests are being bull-dozed in order to create more pasture land for this kind of production. And it is to allow this kind of beef production and to provide ever cheaper food for the wealthiest consumers in the world – that is the driving agenda at the WTO. And I'll just say a few things about that in one second.

But as an overall statement, what I'm saying is that if Irish farming is to have a future, it must be on the basis of being able to differentiate itself from this kind of product. Because it is simply not possible for the 35-cow farmer in Ireland to compete on an equal footing with the 35,000-cow farmer in Brazil who is using cheap labour and who has cheap land. And I think it is a mistake for Oxfam to think that if the 25-cow farmer in Ireland can't compete with this 35,000-cow farmer in Brazil, that the 3-cow farmer in Ghana will somehow compete with him. And this misapprehension was also a driving motivation behind what has happened in the reform of the sugar policy, where again the likes of Oxfam supported liberalisation of the sugar market in the belief that it would help sugar producers in the least developed countries.

The outcome has been that in some of these countries, the benefits of debt-relief are far outweighed by the disaster of their sugar industries going downhill, along with European farmers, and again the beneficiary being huge ranch farms in South America.

So if Irish farmers are to compete, as I say, the secret must be to be able to differentiate our product – to sell a different product which has specific characteristics that are attractive to the people that want them. And in a general sense what I'm talking about is food produced as close as possible to a natural method, not necessarily organic, but free-range is a phrase I

often use, which will be appealing to those consumers who think more and more about the types of food they eat.

And I'm thinking in terms as well of the fact that many consumers in Europe are now becoming more interested in the concept of Slow Food ideology [1]. I'm thinking that last night I was watching a show on television about the hydrogenated fats debate, thinking about the fact that many consumers are now realizing that highly processed foods are not synonymous with a healthy life-style or well-being. And that we need to go back a little bit to the kind of eating that was part and parcel of what happened many years ago.

That's not to say we abandon technology; it's to say that we maintain some of the best things from natural food production methods, and above all, that we provide that choice to consumers.

So it's against that background that we in ICSA are opposed to GM production methods in this country, because – even if we said that we don't necessarily desire or demand a GM-free world – it is essential, I think, that those consumers who want a GM-free diet can have it.

And how can that be best achieved? By having realistic, pragmatic, GM-free zones that are put forward as an example. And in that case, "co-existence", which I might talk about in the afternoon session, is really a nonsense that we're listening to. We're being told one farmer has it and the next farmer doesn't. A realistic GM-free policy would be for the island of Ireland in its entirety to be GM-free, so that this would be one region at least that could supply the consumers of Europe with the GM-free product they desire.

As I said I was in Strasbourg this week, which meant effectively that I traveled at the cross-roads of Germany, Luxembourg and France – a very good agricultural region, with the Moselle Valley and so on. But when you see that region, you can see how they can't quite so easily have a GM-free region as us, because you have to co-ordinate because you have to co-ordinate three different Member States' policies. You have road transport, it's almost like the cross-roads of Europe.

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Ireland, on the other hand, because of its natural geographic separation from Europe has not only a realistic GM-free capability, it also has the credibility to market that to the rest of Europe.

But when we talk about this local context, and the advantages of keeping Ireland GM-free, we are pursuing this policy but it's not simple, it's not straightforward. And that's because policy comes at different levels.

To begin with, we've got the local authorities. And to a certain extent there has been success with local authorities in persuading them of the merits of GM-free regions. At this stage I think seven local authorities have voted for GM-free regions [there are in fact eight regions, see map - Ed.]. But that has very little effect when you consider that as you move up the line, the agenda is being set at a higher level.

When you go to national representatives [i.e. TDs (Members of the Irish Parliament)], generally we find that many of them are quite receptive to the argument we're putting forward. And I have yet to see a few national representatives tell us we're wrong.

When it gets to Cabinet level, the water begins to muddy up a little bit. The Irish Cabinet has taken a stand-on-the-fence type of view, and this is seen for example in the way they have voted in important votes at the Council of Ministers – typically abstaining [2].

And that has led to the bizarre scenario where under the Comitology Procedure of the European Union, a majority of Member States can vote against a particular introduction or licensing of a GM-type measure, and yet even though a majority have voted against it,

because they have not achieved a "Qualified Majority" it goes back to the European Commission, which sends it back for a second vote. And if the second vote goes the same way as the first vote (which it almost always does because the first vote is by the civil servants and the second vote is by the Ministers who are instructing the civil servants, so – big surprise – there isn't any change in the position), then bizarrely, against the wishes of the majority of the Member States, the GM argument wins.

And the European Commission then, in turn, seems to be heavily influenced by other forces. Typically in this situation it's the threat of being brought to panel resolution at the WTO, which effectively means that the WTO is calling the shots. We've come back full-circle to what I was talking about a few minutes ago.

**The European Commission seems to be heavily influenced by the threat of being brought to panel resolution at the WTO, which effectively means that the WTO is calling the shots.**

WTO is where this is really all emanating from.

And, WTO is not something that is easy to lobby. If, for example, we were to go to a WTO meeting in Cancún (and we've been there) or Hong Kong or wherever, the place is absolutely full up with all kinds of [biotech industry] representatives. But the water darkening, behind-the-scenes lobbying techniques that get used there are really a sight to behold!

We in ICSA, as lobbyists, always issue press releases about almost everything we do, so that our position is very transparent. But when you get to the lobbying carried out by multi-national corporations, you find that they are almost non-existent. It's impossible to find press releases from these types of organisations – yet they employ far more lobbyist than are employed by the majority of people which include, for example, the farmers that I represent – because they do it behind closed doors.

The outcome of all of this is that up there at the WTO is a drive for GM products, and this is what concerns us. We see very clearly that since this is happening in the rather disguised way that it does, farmers are losing control.

We've heard earlier on about the dangers of patenting of seed, and it was quite interesting to hear the previous speakers, and I concur very much with their remarks, and Percy Schmeiser's situation is, I suppose, instructive on this one. We're concerned about that.

But as a bigger picture, I would say we are concerned about the whole trend in food production, full stop.

Recently I was at the Food & Drinks Industry Ireland Conference and it was quite interesting. There was a representative there from the American Farm Bureau Federation [3]. In my innocence, I thought, "God! This guy has the same job as me, so we're doing the same thing". But he stood up and said that he had five million members. And I was there with my ten thousand members and I was saying "Mmmh, OK, we're not quite the same". And he then went on to explain how three thousand of those members were doing "quite well." And he had a figure for how much they were producing, but effectively these were the people who were driving ahead and powering forward in American agriculture. And I stood up afterwards and I asked him how he did it, because you know I often have three or four members who are unhappy and I get to hear about it very quickly! He has 5,000,000 members, and by my definition 4,997,000 of them are unhappy, and 3,000 of them are doing all right. "How did you manage to keep them all happy, Bob?" He didn't want to answer that question.

There was another speaker then, who was the representative of a cooperative-type buying-group structure. They were effectively a purchasing group for a cartel of supermarkets who have come together because – and just grab this now – they felt that as individual supermarkets, they didn't have enough power to drive down price paid to their suppliers!

Now these are supermarkets who have huge, almost monopolistic power, but they have come together – internationally, right across Europe – to try to drive price down even further. His comment was – and he said it with an air of approval – that in their vision there would be less and less people buying their food, it would be concentrated ultimately in the hands of two or three super-corporations, or alternatively, a number of corporations acting in concert together. And his comment was that ultimately they foresaw a situation where for each particular food product line, for example rice or Bolognese sauce, there was only really room for one or two product suppliers in each line. This is globally now, right?

So if you wanted Bolognese sauce, for example, no matter where you went in Europe, you would have the choice of Uncle Ben's or Dolmio, full stop. I just chose those as two examples. No room at all for indigenous Italian producers, smaller-scale producers; no room at all for slight differentiation in taste; no room at all for slight differentiation in production methods. Because basically they saw all these alternative suppliers as being a waste of money. The key was to drive down price: you only really need two choices, A or B.

And when I put that alongside the fact that my friend in the American Farm Bureau saw three thousand farmers, and this guy saw two suppliers of every food product, the vision of Hell came upon me.

Now here is where it gets interesting, because while you can say that Dolmio sauce is an industrial product made in a factory, you can see how that could be produced by just two suppliers in the world. But lettuces, on the other hand, are produced by millions of farmers; so there's no way that can be concentrated in the hands of two individual farmers – until you start thinking about the GM thing.

And then you see how it's possible. Because if Monsanto and BASF, for example, control – through genetic modification – the seed for a vegetable, then in that situation, possibly even something which theoretically is produced by many millions of farmers – each acting as an individual on their own and each using their own time-honoured, handed-down traditional methods of producing it – no longer exists. So in fact you just have two as well.

**If Monsanto and BASF control – through genetic modification – the seed for a vegetable, then something which theoretically is produced by many millions of farmers no longer exists.**

And ultimately I think the point is that consumers' choice is completely undermined by this whole trend. And all of it is part of the trend. And from my point of view, farmers need to be very, very wary of this. Because ultimately what it's doing is trying to enslave the farming population of the world.

One final point, and I would urge you to be aware of this. Unfortunately – and I wonder what happens here – at the TWO, the dulcet tones of Peter Mandelson [the EU Commissioner for Trade] and Crawford Falconer [the New Zealand Ambassador who is the new WTO Agriculture Chairman] and so on are used to convince you that what is happening is actually that wealthy European farmers are just getting their come-uppance in order to give a bit of a chance to the little guy in Brazil, the little guy in India and so on.

No! What's happening is that every effort is being made – and this is exactly the same as the Gamma workers dispute [4], to pay less and less to the small guy, the individual farmer. There is no solution here to Third World poverty, to ensure that the 37 people who control Brazilian agriculture [don't] get ever so more wealthy. There is no solution in WTO which can be achieved while Free Trade is allowed to be used and wrestled by multi-national corporations in their own interest. And at the same time, there is no mention in WTO – which there would be if it was a credible organization – there is no mention of ensuring that there be some kind of equality of production methods, equality of labour rights, minimum wage standards.

I'm not saying, for example, that there should be an €8 per hour minimum wage in Brazil, because that wouldn't work. But I would think that any country which benefits from WTO should have in place some kind of wage standards, in order that – if there are to be benefits from trade between different states – then the ordinary people at grass-roots level can benefit.

But that's not what it's about. Oxfam has been hi-jacked by the interests of multi-national corporations, and the WTO has been hi-jacked by the interests of multi-national corporations.

And that is why, in our view, it is so difficult to make progress on this GM-free Ireland issue. Because ultimately the people have spoken in many of the Member States; national governments have spoken; and each time they have been undermined by the bizarre Comitology Procedure.

They've been undermined as well by, for example, subtle pressure being exerted on the Irish Cabinet – which is that if you oppose GM production methods, somehow the country will be seen as backward, illiterate, and technologically naïve! And the fear of upsetting multi-national corporations because of Foreign Direct Investment [5] weighs heavily on their mind. And that is then mixed up with the fact that having a GM-free Ireland is not a backward step, it's a progressive step.

So that's all I'm going to say now, except that we as farmers are deeply concerned at the way in which our views and our individual farmers are being undermined by the interests of global power.

Thank you.

### **Follow-up comments by Michael O'Callaghan (conference chair)**

Thank you Eddie. Those of you who read the Irish Farmers Journal may have noticed that all of a sudden – miraculously – the IFA and the Farmers Journal have expressed a huge interest in the welfare of Brazilian farmers in relation to the import of cheaper beef. The Journal had a good article that covered many of the problems that are happening there with deforestation, with people being made landless and so on.



What they specifically did not mention is that the worst aspect of what is happening in Brazil with the production of soy is that it is genetically modified soy.

Huge areas of Brazil and large parts of Argentina, but especially the Amazon, are being deforested illegally, including National Parks, in violation of all kinds of laws, by big companies that are coming in, chopping everything down, mass-producing soya beans that are genetically modified, which huge amounts of pesticides and weedkillers, in order to produce cheap animal feed which we are then told in Europe is the only kind of soy available for Irish farmers including sheep and cattle farmers – so that most of the meat and dairy produce that we are producing in Ireland now comes from animals that have been fed on a diet which includes genetically modified soy, maize, and some rapeseed. All the GM soy is creating havoc for the populations in the traditional economies of South America.

Tomorrow we will have a report from Miren-Maialen Samper who has just come back from Guatemala, who will give us a perspective on that issue.

I'd like to say that we all this morning just had coffee outside, and the milk in that coffee probably came from cows that were fed on GM maize and soya. So in our stomachs right now, in this pleasant room, we are eating up the rainforests of South America, irreversibly contaminating their ecosystem, and causing indigenous peoples to be evicted from their traditional homelands to work as slave labour and so on.

This doesn't have to be that way! At the European GMO-free Regions Conference which takes place every year in Berlin [6] – run by Benedikt Haerlin [7] who will be arriving here this afternoon to give us a wonderful experience tomorrow – we met one of the largest non-GM soybean exporting groups from Brazil [8] whose European representative is based in Geneva. He said there is an ample supply of GM-free soya. It is marginally more expensive than the GM variety but it comes from family-owned farms in Brazil and Irish farmers can access it now if they want to [for details see the animal feed section of this web site].

Just before I pass on the mic to Kate, I'd like to say that our government maintains this myth that if we avoid GM we're going to be less competitive, but that is absolute nonsense! It is disgraceful that the government and the Department of Agriculture and the IFA are perpetrating that lie.

It is already the case that farmers – and I'm not even talking about organic farmers – conventional farmers in Ireland who are able to source non-GM animal feed for their live cattle, beef and dairy produce exports are getting premium prices, better prices than those who allow contamination by GM ingredients in the animal feed chain. So it's already in our economic interest to go down that route. I'll give just one example, the Silver Pail Dairy in Cork earlier this year signed a two million-dollar contract to provide the world's largest ice-cream manufacturer, Baskin-Robbins, with certified non-GM ice-cream from Irish cattle who were not fed on a GM diet – for the whole European market. And that's because European consumers didn't want to buy ice-cream that came from American cattle that were fed on GM ingredients.

Another example is the whole organic sector. So just on that note, I'd like to introduce and thank Kate Carmody for coming. She's on the board of the Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association (IOFGA). She has a PowerPoint presentation, and also said she has a terrible headache and might have to make her presentation short. So thank you, Kate.

#### **NOTES:**

1. Slow Food was founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy in 1986. It is an international association that promotes food and wine culture, but also defends food and agricultural biodiversity worldwide. It opposes the standardisation of taste, defends the need for consumer information, protects cultural identities tied to food and gastronomic traditions, safeguards foods and cultivation and processing techniques inherited from tradition and defend domestic and wild animal and vegetable species. Slow Food boasts 83,000 members worldwide and offices (in order of creation) in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, the USA, France, Japan, and Great Britain.

Slow Food International: [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com).

Slow Food Ireland: [www.slowfoodireland.com](http://www.slowfoodireland.com).

2. Irish voting record on GM issues in the EC:  
[www.gmfreeireland.org/resources/documents/EU/EUvotes.php](http://www.gmfreeireland.org/resources/documents/EU/EUvotes.php).
3. American Farm Bureau Federation: [www.fb.org](http://www.fb.org)
4. The Gamma dispute took place in Ireland in 2006 after revelations this company was accused of stealing millions of Euro from its Turkish and Irish workers. The slave wages being paid by GAMA and many other companies to migrant workers were being used to cut the wages and conditions of Irish workers by claiming the need to cut costs in order to compete.

5. See "Project Green", the Green Ireland Conference presentation by Brody Sweeney (CEO of O'Brien's Sandwich Bars) which criticises the risk of Ireland's over-dependence on Foreign Direct Investment. You can download it a 2.3 MB PowerPoint presentation from [www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/PPT/ProjectGreen.ppt](http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/PPT/ProjectGreen.ppt).
6. See proceedings of the European Conference on GMO-free Regions, Biodiversity and Human Development: [www.gmo-free-regions.org](http://www.gmo-free-regions.org)
7. See the "GMO-free regions: a global perspective" presentation by Benedikt Haerlin at the Green Ireland Conference which you can download as a large 17.5 MB PowerPoint presentation from: [www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/PPT/haerlin.ppt](http://www.gmfreeireland.org/conference/PPT/haerlin.ppt).
8. IMCOPA is a Brazilian family-run business which provides GM-free soybean imports that are controlled, certified, sustainable, ethical and consumer friendly. Its European office is run by Joche Koester in Geneva, Switzerland (email: [jk@imcopa.com](mailto:jk@imcopa.com)). Web site: [www.imcopa.com](http://www.imcopa.com).

You can download IMPCOPA's presentation for the European conference on GMO-free regions, biodiversity and rural development (Berlin, 14-15 January 2006) "GM-free soybean imports and availability: IMCOPA - a simple family story" as a 432KB PowerPoint presentation from [www.gmfreeireland.org/feed/documents/koester\\_panel.pptt](http://www.gmfreeireland.org/feed/documents/koester_panel.pptt).

For more on GM-free animal feed in Ireland see [www.gmfreeireland.org/feed/](http://www.gmfreeireland.org/feed/).