

**Address by IFA President Eddie Downey
at the NFA-IFA 60th Anniversary Commemoration at
The Convention Centre Dublin, 6th January, 2015**

Commissioner Hogan, Ministers past and present, Ambassadors, religious leaders, distinguished guests, fellow officers and members, ladies and gentlemen.

You are all very welcome to our celebration of the 60th Anniversary of NFA-IFA.

Commissioner Hogan, we are really pleased that you took the time to join us here today and we look forward to working with you on the many important issues facing our sector.

Gathered here today, in The Conference Centre Dublin, are leading IFA voluntary officers who have contributed to the work and success of our Association over the past 60 years. You are all warmly welcome.

I extend a welcome to political leaders from both Government and Opposition, particularly our Minister for Agriculture Simon Coveney, Minister for Foreign Affairs Charlie Flanagan, Minister for Communications and Natural Resources Alex White, Minister of State Anne Phelan and Vice President of Fianna Fail, Deputy Timmy Dooley representing Leader of the Opposition Micheal Martin, who has a family bereavement.

We also have Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, members of the Dail and Seanad, and Members of the European Parliament. You are all very welcome.

I am very proud to hold the office of President of our great Association, in this Anniversary year, and hope you have an enjoyable day.

Foundation

Today's commemoration takes place 60 years, to the day, after the founding of the National Farmers' Association in the Four Provinces Ballroom, Harcourt Street, Dublin on the 6th of January 1955.

We owe an immense debt of gratitude to the early pioneers who founded the NFA. Macra na Feirme had shown the way in the previous decade and a resolution from the Macra club in Mooncoin, County Kilkenny set the ball rolling.

Many former Macra members were active in the new senior organisation and I am delighted that Macra President Kieran O'Dowd, who sits on our Executive Council, is with us today.

The vision of Juan Greene, our first President, and the courageous men around him was to build a truly independent organisation, bringing together for the first time farmers in all sectors and from every part of the country.

In the early 1950s, Irish farming was in a dire state. Living standards and the economy of the country were no better. After the foundation of the State, there had been several attempts to establish an all-embracing national farmers' union, but without success.

Non Political

The early NFA leaders insisted from the start that the NFA would be non-party political and non-sectarian.

The NFA's primary purpose was to develop agriculture and advance the living standards of Irish farm families. This remains our core mission.

Branch structure

At the outset, the founders laid down the Branch structure, which is still so important to IFA today, giving the Association a physical presence in every parish in rural Ireland.

Our 946-strong branch network gives us unique organisational strength and provides the democratic platform, through which the members elect their representatives to the County Executives and their President.

Early work of NFA included promoting the establishment of the Agricultural Institute to increase farm output and efficiency, establishment of the marts and key service businesses such as FBD Insurance and later IFAC Accountants.

Recognition of the new organisation's right to represent farmers did not come easily. The 1966-67 Farmers' Rights Campaign was the turning point.

A march on Dublin by thousands of farmers from across the country, followed by a mass rally on Merrion Square and the 21 day protest on the steps of Government Buildings showed the determination of our founding fathers.

A campaign of civil disobedience followed with the blocking of roads and bridges, and hundreds of farmers went to jail in the fight for farmers' rights. I want to recognise the survivors of that campaign who are here today.

As a young boy on the farm at home, I remember the guards coming into our house following a protest.

EEC Membership

In the 1960s, the NFA identified the strategic advantage for Irish agriculture of joining the EEC.

In 1971, the NFA joined forces with specialist organisations - the BVA, Leinster Milk Producers, Cork Milk Producers and the Commercial Horticultural Association - to establish the IFA.

The IFA immediately made its presence felt, opening an office at the heart of European decision-making in Brussels. This office, supported by the European Involvement Fund, has ensured that our Association has effectively represented Irish Farmers' interests in Europe and internationally over the decades.

I want to welcome our guests and farming colleagues from abroad here today and especially our near neighbours from Northern Ireland and Britain.

I must take the opportunity to welcome our recently retired Director of European Affairs Michael Treacy and his wife Mary and to acknowledge Michael's significant contribution to IFA's success in Europe over the past 25 years.

Our first decade of EEC membership allowed Irish farmers the opportunity to catch up with their more developed European counterparts. Farmers made huge investments, doubling milk output and expanding livestock and tillage production.

The history of IFA is the story of six decades of hard work, at home and abroad, using the strength and unity of purpose of a focused and professionally run organisation to deliver on the issues of the day for Irish Farm Families.

During each President's tenure, new issues and challenges arose, and time today does not allow us recount the proud and immense record of delivery of our great Association.

However I am sure our MC, Mary Kennedy, will raise some of our many highlights with our special guests.

Book

I am also delighted to advise you that a special 60th commemorative book, *The Path to Power*, will be published this spring. The book includes contributions from many, but the job of pulling 60 years of history together was left to Matt Dempsey, former editor of the *Farmers Journal*.

It will be a great record of the work and delivery of the IFA officers and staff represented in this room today. To Matt and all involved, thank you.

National Committees

Our National Committees play a vital role in IFA's work and delivery and I want to pay tribute to our Commodity Committees, past and present.

Today our Livestock Committee is led by Henry Burns, Dairy by Sean O'Leary, Liquid Milk by Teddy Cashman, Sheep by John Lynksey, Grain by Liam Dunne, Pigment by Pat O'Flaherty,

Poultry by Nigel Renehan, Potatoes by Eddie Doyle, Forestry by Michael Fleming, Horticulture by Gerry Reilly and Aquaculture by Jerry Gallagher.

Our specialist National Committees are Rural Development led by Flor McCarthy, Farm Business by Tom Doyle, Environment by Harold Kingston, Hill Farming by Pat Dunne and FMP by Denis Fagan.

All of our National Committee and Project Team members today are representative of generations of national voluntary officers, whose hard work and delivery has made such a difference to the lives of farm families. Thank you all for your great support.

Our Farm Family Committee currently led by Maura Canning is doing trojan work in the areas of farm safety, farm stress and the broad range of social issues affecting farm families. Our association is making safety a key priority in 2015 and we are encouraged that many agri businesses here today have agreed to participate in our "*Save Lives - Think Safety, Farm Safely*" Campaign.

Farm women

I want to especially acknowledge here the central role of farm women over the generations. The massive support of spouses and partners has allowed our voluntary officers give of their time in the interests of all farm families. And I am delighted to see so many of you here today.

I am especially honoured to be your President at a time when IFA paid-up membership numbers are at an all-time high, and I want to thank all farm families and agribusiness for their valued support of the Association.

I want to say a special thank you to all of our current County Chairmen across the country who, with their county and branch officers, look after the day-to-day running of our organisation at ground level. You do an excellent job and our founding fathers would be very proud of the organisation's strength and membership in every county.

Council

We are delighted to have present here all surviving Council members since 1955, all of whom have contributed greatly to the work of the Association at national level. Thank you all for your efforts.

I want to personally acknowledge the hard work and support of our current Executive Board team, our Deputy President Corkman Tim O'Leary, National Treasurer/Returning Officer Jer Bergin from Laois, and our Regional Chairmen, for Munster James McCarthy, South Leinster James Murphy, Ulster/North Leinster Bert Stewart and Connacht Tom Turley.

The deceased

Unfortunately after 60 years, many of the great men and women, who have led and worked for this organisation are no longer with us.

Just before Christmas, we lost Tom Cahill of Clare who was the last survivor of the nine great leaders who sat on the steps of Government Buildings in the fight for recognition of our Association.

We particularly remember our deceased Presidents, Juan Greene, Rickard Deasy, TJ Maher, Paddy Lane and Joe Rea, our deceased General Secretaries Sean Healy and Michael Kehoe, and deceased officers and staff, all of whom served this Association with distinction.

I want to especially note the sad and untimely passing of Frances Guckian, who was PA to several former Presidents. On a personal note, I'd like to mention the late Richard Booth, who was my Chairman when I first got involved at national level in the Livestock Committee.

We are fortunate to have so many of our former Presidents with us today and I want to welcome John Bryan and his wife Rena, Pdraig Walshe and his wife Ella, John Dillon who sadly lost his wife Essie, John Donnelly and Teresa, Tom Parlon, Alan Gillis and Tom Clinton - and we send our good wishes to your wives Martha, Irene and Helen - and Donie Cashman and his wife Peggy.

Staff

It's great to see so many former staff members here today, especially former General Secretary Michael Berkery, who so ably led our Association for 26 years and made a huge contribution to the success of IFA and the well-being of Irish farmers.

Michael is Chairman of FBD and I am glad to say the strong bonds between our organisations have endured and serve farmers well.

I particularly want to thank the FBD group for their generous support for today's event.

I also want to acknowledge the contribution of all former and retired staff members, particularly retired Chief Economist Con Lucey. Thank you all.

I am especially pleased to welcome former staff member Tom Tynan, as one of Commissioner Hogan's key advisors in Brussels.

Today, our Association is well served by a highly motivated and dedicated professional staff. I want to acknowledge your expertise, support and guidance. Your commitment has made a real difference to farmers and the continued success of our Association.

I'd like to take the opportunity to say a special thanks to our staff's spouses and partners for their understanding of the long hours and evenings away from home demanded.

We have a number of staff in the Farm Centre, the Regional offices and Brussels, who have given over 25 years of dedicated service to the Association. You know who you are and I want to recognise your special contribution, which is reflective of the commitment of all our staff.

Our organisation and professional staff are ably managed by our General Secretary Pat Smith, who continues to make a major contribution to the development and success of the Association, as he has done for the past 25 years.

Media

I'm pleased to say the farming community has been well served over the years by a dedicated farming press, and the national and local media, who are represented here today.

I especially want to recognise Justin McCarthy and his colleagues from the *Farmers Journal*, which has played such a pivotal role in developing Irish Agriculture.

I cannot let the day pass without acknowledging the contribution of the late Paddy O'Keeffe.

Message to Commissioner and Minister

Ladies and gentlemen, in 2015 Irish agriculture is still the backbone of the rural economy, supporting 300,000 jobs, and with real potential to grow the volume and value of our high quality food products for consumers across the world.

However, Commissioner Hogan, Minister Coveney and members of the Government, farm families again find themselves under immense pressure, with an inadequate return for their hard work and investment.

Extreme price volatility, escalating input costs that bear no relation to product prices, excessive bureaucracy, the threat of damaging trade deals and the inequity in returns from the food supply chain between producers, processors and retailers must all be addressed.

The EU family farm model of agriculture must be protected, as the most sustainable way of delivering food security for Europe's 500m citizens and our rapidly growing global population.

Right now, we are raising specific issues with both Commissioner Hogan and Minister Coveney including the need for:

- immediate implementation of the new farm schemes, in particular GLAS, with all farmers applying being accepted and a substantial payment in 2015;
- stronger EU dairy market supports;
- viable prices for livestock farmers by ensuring full implementation of all commitments agreed in the Minister's Beef Forum;
- real initiatives on CAP simplification to cut bureaucracy and remove the fear around inspections;
- action to address monopolies in the input sector; and,

- stronger measures to support pig prices in the wake of the Russian trade ban and the threat from the PED virus.

My central message today is that Irish and European farm families are entitled to – and must get – a fair reward and a decent income for the vital job we do for society.

Supporting farming and innovative farm enterprises, through the CAP and Rural Development Programme, and investment in key rural infrastructure such as broadband, is the most effective way of ensuring a vibrant rural economy.

Unity Strength Delivery

Ladies and gentlemen, the achievements of IFA over the last 60 years are immense.

Our founding principle of Unity, Strength and Delivery has served farmers well.

Our representation and influence at all levels continue to grow and I believe our founding fathers, who fought so hard to give farmers a strong voice, would be immensely proud of our standing today, both at home and abroad.

As we look to the future, it is up to all of us to work hard -and together - to build on this proud record of achievement for all farm families.

Thank you