

## FARMERS' BREXIT WORRIES



Prices of farm animals have dropped over the past six months as the summer weather led to an over supply; the push to move stock pre-Brexit is clearly causing consternation among Irish farmers.

Granted, a hard Brexit might be just hard ball negotiation tactics in advance of the March deadline when the UK to leave the European Union. Even if the deal is done, damage to confidence is hitting farmers. Meat factories are over supplied and stock in storage is at a peak. It's clearly going to take time for new markets to be developed away from the UK.

It's worth underlining the level of two way trading between North and South with respect to animals going to factories, in addition to milk also being transported. That trade has already disrupted already. Border farmers will be harder hit than their South East contemporaries. We have also learned that lambs are going south and prices are falling for them too although there's big demand for Irish lamb in both France and Italy. It's worth stating that Ireland has a massive €5 billion food export trade to the UK so the significance of an agreed Brexit for this issue alone is obviously of enormous significance.

Perhaps Taoiseach Leo Varadkar needs to get out into rural Ireland a little more and talk to farmers, to articulate what can be put in place by the EU in the event of a hard Brexit. This week, the Taoiseach has gone to Africa to visit overseas peacekeeping troops. Perhaps this has been a long time in the planning but a few days out of the capital and going to farm gates and marts would surely be a better use of his time as the Brexit deadline app to learn what is going on is a good plan.

After all, many farmers are the backbone of the Fine Gael support base and the Local Elections are just a matter of months away as well. Could hardship funds be put in place as there will obviously be a fall in demand for Irish food in the UK. Export supports to other countries will be needed and more lobbying on this may be required in Brussels. The situation remains very volatile but prices have already been affected. Denmark and Holland, given their large food exports to the UK will also be negatively impacted. Northern Irish farmers also buy animal stock from the Republic and there's clearly good co-operation on both sides of the border, but even those sales have dropped off as well.

The beef sector is the most challenged and farmers' concerns about the future had led to a slowdown in yard and equipment investment. Fewer cars and tractors will be bought and land prices may drop too as a result of uncertainty. The Democratic Unionist Party do not seem to be overly concerned if we end up with a hard Brexit and appear to care little for their support among farmers. They are, of course, used to brinkmanship and appear happy to leave Prime Minister Theresa May over a barrel given that she must secure their votes (and those from her own ranks, as well as Labour's) when it comes to her exit deal from the EU.

Leo Varadkar must get special support for our farmers. But first of all, he needs to connect with them more meaningfully.