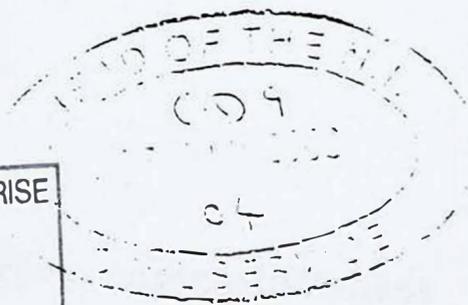


FROM: BRID RODGERS
14 JANUARY 2000

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE
TRADE & INVESTMENT
11 FEB 2000
RECEIVED
PRIVATE OFFICE



FIRST MINISTER
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

GM/296/00
MC POG

PROGRAMME OF GOVERNMENT

In your minute of 22 December you asked Departmental Ministers to identify those priority areas within our Departmental responsibilities which should feature in a Programme of Government.

Introduction

I should emphasise at the outset that the entire agriculture industry in Northern Ireland remains in a parlous state. All sectors of the industry have been seriously affected by a series of factors, including, of course, the BSE crisis, which have left farm incomes at extremely low levels and put considerable numbers of farmers out of business.

Yet agriculture can still make a significant contribution to the economy of Northern Ireland if we are able to find, within the constraints of the Common Agriculture Policy and overall UK agriculture policy, the means of providing appropriate and well targetted support. I believe previous administrations have failed to give sufficient priority to agriculture in Northern Ireland and to its position in our economic and social structure, and I hope that we now have the opportunity to correct that.

Farming

With this in mind I am seeking, in consultation with all sectors of the industry to develop a Vision for the Future of Agriculture in Northern Ireland to the end of the present CAP reform agreement period.

Prominent among the objectives likely to feature in this Vision is the attainment for Northern Ireland of low incidence BSE status, action to reverse the decline in the quality of livestock and the resumption of significant beef and cattle exports. Not only would this have a quick and tangible effect on farming incomes, but it would have equal benefit in boosting the morale of a beleaguered industry.

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The Vision will also address the need to improve competitiveness throughout the agri-food sector, not least by improving the levels of vocational qualification achieved here, which fall well below the equivalent in Great Britain, and by encouraging the uptake of appropriate technology and management and marketing practice.

We need also to increase the education and training opportunities for farmers and their families who wish to seek alternative employment outside the industry.

We need to respond to pressure for greater environmental awareness in farming, both by encouraging environmentally sensitive farming, including conversion to organic production methods, and by reducing the incidence of farm source pollution.

Given the nature of Northern Ireland farming, it will be essential to maintain a viable farming community in the hill areas of the Province through a properly resourced LFA support programme.

All these policy areas will feature in the 'Vision for the Future' discussions to which I have referred, but will not be deliverable on the scale necessary without a significant injection of additional resources.

Moreover, the Structural Funds plans recently submitted to Brussels contain suggested measures likely to offer some support to the processing side of the industry, to forestry, to the wider rural community and to fisheries, but very little of direct benefit to the farmers themselves. Without an additional £10 million a year to provide the necessary cover, I am unlikely to be able to proceed with such measures as a Red Meat Quality Scheme or a significant farm diversification effort.

Rural Development

The inclusion of 'Rural Development' in my Department's title reinforces the need to continue to commit significant resources to this area of activity both as a socio-economic regeneration programme directed to disadvantaged rural areas and as the 'second pillar' of the CAP.

Rural development measures already feature in both the Transitional Objective One and Peace Two Structural Funds Programmes, and the opportunity to take further advantage of European co-funding will flow from the Community Initiatives, of which LEADER + is specific to rural development. Funding for these programmes will be required for future years at at least the level set for the final year of the CSR.

Forestry

The DARD Forest Service is currently undertaking a major review of all aspects of forestry policy, and new policy proposals may emerge from that exercise. In the meantime they face significant resource difficulties - of the order of £2.0 million - largely because of current low timber prices.

Rivers

The River Agency capital programme for essential flood defence improvement works of some £40 million must be protected to safeguard life and property throughout Northern Ireland. It is expected that this figure will increase as surveys of assets continue. Some increase in provision from 2003/04 would enable this vital programme of works to be expedited.

Science Service

Within the DARD Science Service resources are required to introduce a programme of genetic traceability of farm animals. This would significantly improve our existing traceability system and could assist too with breeding programmes. Something over £1.0 million would be required over four years.

I should also perhaps register - though I readily concede that it should not feature in a Programme of Government - that the buildings occupied by the Science Service are in serious disrepair, and that major refurbishment is urgently required if we are not to be in breach of Health & Safety requirements. The total cost of this essential work is of the order of £18 million. Within this the highest priority will be addressing the need for new accommodation for Category 2 and 3 facilities required to handle dangerous pathogens such as TB, Brucella and E Coli which are at the core of the Department's animal health and food safety policies.

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Sea Fisheries

In respect of Sea Fisheries, the Department's aim is to strengthen the industry by maximising its fishing opportunities commensurate with conserving and protecting fish stocks, and assisting its commercial development. We shall therefore seek to achieve a more competitive fishing fleet, stronger fish stocks, sustainably fished, a safe, modern operating infrastructure and a profitable processing sector, focussing on quality and marketing.

Much of this can be achieved within existing public expenditure allocations, but three key components, essential for the successful implementation of the strategy, will require significant injection of resources - a replacement fisheries protection vessel (£3m), a replacement scientific research vessel (£25m) and the improvement of the entrance to Kilkeel Harbour (£15m). This last item has, of course, significant political as well as resource implications.

Conclusion

I have endeavoured to set out here the key challenges facing this Department over the next year or two. I have deliberately avoided inundating you with detail. It is nevertheless clear that I am responsible for trying to assist an industry in deep crisis, and one which has high aspirations that a devolved administration in Northern Ireland will accord it a much higher priority than was the case during Direct Rule. I look forward to the opportunity of elaborating on all this when we meet bilaterally as you have proposed, and hope that such a discussion might be conducted at a strategic level.

Bríd

BRÍD RODGERS
Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development