

The Roots of Wealth Creation

Written by GINI

Wednesday, 24 March 2010 00:00



No-one would dare call the farmers of Northern Ireland 'Lilies of the Field' or, even worse, 'Pansies of the Pastures'. But they do need our consideration for they certainly do not sow or reap very much except in their annual harvest of farming subsidies that seem perversely designed to minimise innovation and preserve some distant folk memory of our long dead rural economy.

Too harsh? Unfair? Unkind? Well, maybe grossly overstated for a minority but overall sadly all too true for an aging farming population sitting on one of our greatest but under-utilised resources. Our recently acquired predisposition towards not, if at all possible, working for a living is eating away at our economy.

But money doesn't grow on trees – even when the trees are converted into the mountains of paper that bureaucrats seem to need to sustain their generosity. It is this deep-rooted dependency culture that needs to be turned into enterprise, economic growth and employment for the benefit of all.

We have all gotten used to the mantra of services out-performing manufacturing to such extent that we became dependent on the clever clogs of New York, the City of London (or Dublin) and their financial wizardry. That astronomically high tide has gone out – exposing for all to see those who were swimming naked. And long before that we were told that agriculture was some primitive occupation from which we should migrate to the luxurious comforts of city living.

Groupe Intellex holds a contrary view (contrary views are written into the heart of our unreasonable enterprise) that we should not waste God-given resources, that we should not choose, even by default, to ignore the massive potential value of our countryside and our farming communities. There is value to be found in farming – but not in the way we do things around here.

Just look at the landscape. The average age of Northern Ireland's farmers is now 64. The

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average size of farms is 60 acres - 30% of the minimum level of current viability.

Seven farms in every ten are now run as part-time ventures with the farmers seeking employment elsewhere to make ends meet.

Output has fallen and continues to fall – the most recent example being yet another closure of a food processing business – another 85 redundancies because the supply of lambs has dwindled to non-viable levels.

It is not inevitable that *'something must be done'*. The current policy is to tinker with the system and somehow try to find administrative efficiency savings in the way agricultural subsidies are managed.

Few people have a direct interest in changing the entire basis of the rural economy – which, ironically, means that everybody (yes, *all of us*) should be hopping mad about a level of waste and wasted opportunities that would disgrace any economically failed state governed by tortoises and other revered relics.

That's all very easy to say but what, exactly would you or anyone else suggest? Do you not think that if some magic solution was just waiting to be found it might not have popped up already ?

One thing is certain. Continuation without radical change means continued decline of the sector and an increasing economic dependence on overseas suppliers of food.

It may be unreasonable. It may even be deeply upsetting to those dedicated to trying to preserve time-honoured tradition, but we see huge opportunities awaiting those who are prepared to work together, to find novel ways of collaboration in funding and farming operations, to identify new crop opportunities and new food processing initiatives.

Over the next few months the Groupe Intellex vision for a transformation of agriculture in Northern Ireland will be tested by planting a fresh crop of new ideas and encouraging others to do the same.

This process of Communication, Creativity and Collaboration will challenge established positions.

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- It will worry those who are not yet sufficiently worried.
- It will annoy those who hope or expect to be bailed out by recalcitrant banks.
- It will question the notion that sustainable value can be found in paying farmers to maintain the illusion of a green and pleasant land for the benefit of romantics and the occasional passing tourist.
- And then it will be accused of AWT by those who choose to believe that supermarket bosses are beyond the pail.

It will be an uphill struggle. But across the uplands and downlands of Northern Ireland's glorious countryside, enterprise, innovation and income must return.

The case for investment will be turned over, twisted inside out and on its head. Farmers in Northern Ireland will come to realise that they share a huge responsibility for growing the economy in the years to come.

And remember, *Club Agrivation NI* (CANI) - you heard it, here first, on the GINI channel.

Notes:

AWT is our short-code for Advanced Wishful Thinking.

The Groupe Intellex project, *Club Agrivation NI* (CANI) is directed by Eoin Lambkin as part of our larger programme for the growth of the economies of the island of Ireland.

This article is from a series of 'Provocations' inspired by an earlier series of entirely un-called-for essays entitled 'Action Pointers'.

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