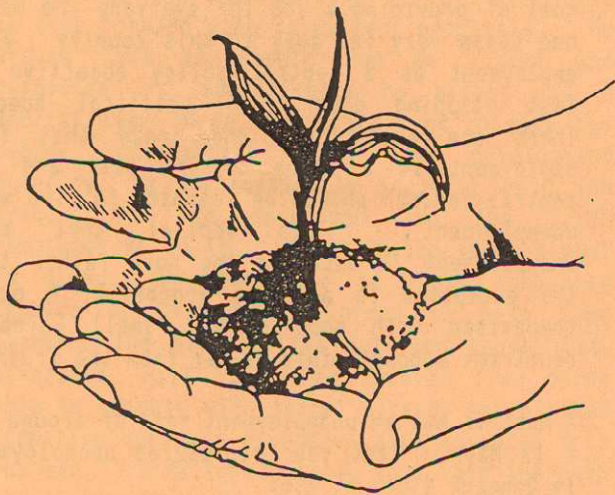


MARY, MARY, QUITE CONTRARY!

Mary (alias Mother Ireland) has been getting over a little shock. Recently, her business consultant, Ida, has been telling her that while her garden is still growing the good old stuff, it hasn't been improved or extended in the last twenty years (1). Even Mary's own family want a quality and a variety in their veg that the old garden isn't producing, and so they are shelling out some £64 million a year to buy the neighbours' veg and fruit. Mary barely noticed it at the time, but since 1973 those crafty neighbours, the Dutch and the Belgians, have taken over a large slice of Mary's market. Mary is staggered by the contrariness of it all.

Mind you, Mary is beginning to realize that there's more to it than crafty neighbours. From what she hears (2), certain governments around the end of the 1960s were rather contrary themselves when it came to looking after the garden and were less than responsible in looking after what used to be the apple of her eye; Erin Foods. Today, Erin Foods is but a shadow of its former self, with a dramatic decline in the acreage given to peas, cabbage, parsnips and carrots, and virtual disappearance of that given to French beans and celery. Given that the Irish consumer has, like Oliver Twist, been wanting more and better since the '60s, this is astounding. Small wonder that foreign horticulturalists and food processors have it all their own way in Mary's garden.



Ida (or IDA, as she's usually known) has put her finger on part of the problem: Irish horticulture needs skilled marketing, a developed grading system (particularly for potatoes), and improved storage and packing facilities. Over the next five years, IDA feels that an extra 1,200 jobs in mushroom growing/picking with 300 in mushroom processing might well be on the cards; and taking food processing as a whole, IDA has her fingers crossed for an extra 5,000 jobs by 1992.

Mary is warmed to the very cockles of her heart by some optimism, what with all this doom and gloom about. Nevertheless, she feels that a lot more could and should be done. For example, a little land reform to make some of the underused smaller farms available on long-term lease available for vegetable growing would be very handy indeed. Mary thinks that IDA places a little too much faith in private industry. Given that foreign competition is highly sophisticated and a tough opponent, the case for a state company for horticulture is strong. It would, of course, be run on strictly business lines, and it would have the resources to finance a serious breakthrough on the market which a private company might not. Besides, private companies aren't in business for the good of the public; if it seems too difficult or risky, then they simply won't invest, and IDA will be left with her pious, but forlorn, hopes. This is an area where the state must take a hand, at least until Irish horticulture gets back on its feet.

IDA's masters will say, of course, that the government cannot afford it; but this is to fail to make the distinction between capital and current expenditure. Capital expenditure is with a view to long-term return. Borrowing abroad to pay the salaries of the civil service is indeed not on, but to refuse to borrow for expanded industry is to be illogical and irresponsible. IDA and friends of hers like TELESIS all say that if we are to prosper we have to become an export-led economy. So refusing to put money into an expanded native horticultural industry to make it a competitive force sounds very suspicious indeed. Even Mary feels that there should be limits to contrariness.

(1) "A Future in Food - strategy for the food and drink industry 1988-1992", Industrial Development Authority (IDA), December '87.

(2) "Farming and the Food Industry", The Workers Party, 1985.

WORKING NOTES

This is the second number of "Working Notes", bulletin of the Unemployment Project of the Centre for Faith and Justice. Through it we hope to share information and analysis of the unemployment situation and related issues with other groups who are working to make jobs a real priority in Irish life today. Each number will contain an extended treatment of one issue and a number of shorter information pieces. We welcome feedback and dialogue on material covered in the bulletin. We are interested in taking united and effective action, with other groups, on these issues. Use these "Working Notes" in any way you like but please acknowledge the source if you are reproducing them.