



Damian McDonald is Director General of the IFA and recently spoke at the 2017 CPA Annual Conference.

Where did your career begin?

Like a lot of people born on a farm I was immersed in working on the farm from a young age. Growing up on a farm you learn a lot about the real world very quickly. My first real job was as a Teaching Assistant in UCD and then as a lecturer in DIT and NCIR as The National College of Ireland was then. I then took up the post as Agricultural Policy Officer with Macra na Feirme in 1997, worked with IFA from 1999-2001 and then became CEO of Macra na Feirme in 2001. In 2007 I left to become the first CEO of Horse Sport Ireland and I joined IFA as Director General in January 2017.

What are your goals in IFA?

IFA is a hugely successful organisation but it has had some well publicised difficulties in recent times. My first objective as Director General is to build the trust of the Executive Board, the National Council and the members of IFA. Being the CEO of an organisation with a huge voluntary membership is much different to running a commercial company or running your own business. In a membership led organisation, where new leaders are elected regularly,

Leadership Insight – Damian McDonald

the focus of the organisation can often change when new people are elected. The current President Joe Healy has done a huge amount of work rebuilding the organisation. There is still work to be done in this area but we need to refocus on our core business or representing farmers.

Corporate Governance

The IFA had done a lot of work in this area. A review was carried out by former Chief Economist Con Lucey and a group was set up to implement the recommendations. The IFA have also taken advice from the IPA. Improving Corporate Governance is a journey with no fixed destination. There are always improvements and modernisations that can be made. Overall, a balance has to be found between getting things done and accounting for how decisions were taken and implemented.

Brexit

IFA President Joe Healy has described Brexit as the biggest threat to the Irish Agri Food sector in a generation. Last year agri food exports were worth over €11bn to the Irish economy, €4bn of this went to the UK. The loss or impairment of the UK market would be very damaging for our sector. IFA has published a comprehensive policy document on Brexit which can be found on our website. In general we want the EU to retain the closest possible trading relationship with the UK. While the UK have ruled out remaining in the EU single market, their recent communications were not as definitive about leaving the EU Customs Union. This would be one of the more favourable possible outcomes for Ireland. Failing this, we need a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with some conditionality in that we would be concerned about the UK being free to do trade deals with other

countries, who have lower production standards than the EU. In that context, we would be looking for a common external tariff on food imports to the UK and the EU.

We also have grave concerns about the impact the UK's departure from the EU will have on the budget for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The UK is currently a net contributor to the CAP and we need commitments that any shortfall arising from Brexit would be made up.

The Government

On Brexit, the Irish Government needs to persuade the other remaining 26 countries in the EU that we need a Brexit outcome which sees the continuation of the closest possible trading relationship with the UK.

Ireland will be negotiating as part of the EU 27 and this is where the Government needs to bring its influence to bare. We think the Government has done well to date but the real issues for Agriculture will have more to do with the future trading relationship than the departure negotiations.

Work Life Balance

When you work in a voluntary organisation there are really no normal working hours. However, most weekends are reasonably free and I try to keep these for family time. The reality is that, the main reason I can do a job like this is due to the support of my wife Siobhan. We have three children aged 18, 15 and 13. One is doing the Leaving and another the Junior Cert this year so it's a challenging year. Without the sacrifices Siobhan makes it would be very difficult for me to do it.