

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to warmly welcome you all to the fabulous Charleville Park Hotel here in Avondhu.

I am very excited and looking forward to a very busy but ultimately enjoyable two years as President of Macra na Feirme. I am delighted to be the first Sligo person to hold the position and only the fourth person from the North West Region to do so. But let me assure you all that as President I will serve each and every county and region equally to the best of my ability.

I have been told by many that I have big shoes to fill and certainly that is the case. Alan Jagoe has proved to be one of the most popular Presidents Macra na Feirme has ever had and also a tremendous ambassador for Macra representing us all from Nohoval to Beijing! It is with a certain degree of sadness that we see Alan move on from the role of President but he still will be with us for another two years on National Council so it not good bye but au revoir!

I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Alan's predecessor Michael Gowing who is attending his last AGM and National Council meeting here today. Best of luck to you, Catherine and Caoimhe.

During my campaign I had three pillars namely Experience, Leadership and Vision which will support the objectives I hope to achieve during the next two years. The time is relatively short and thus a number of key objectives will be prioritised.

In the area of agriculture and young farmers, the most important priority for me as President is ensuring that the recommendations in the Macra Land Mobility and Succession in Ireland study are implemented.

I believe that if we, as an agriculturally based country, are to achieve the ambitious targets set out in the Food Harvest 2020 Report, then we must look at ensuring that Irelands land is

utilised to its maximum productive extent. The time is right for a land use audit and I call on the Minister, Simon Coveney, to ensure that this is carried out. It is crucial that we establish a clear overview of land use and what changes and actions need to be implemented to achieve the thirty per cent growth in production by 2020. There is scope and a need in all areas of the country to farm more efficiently and productively relative to the fertility of the land.

Access to land for young trained farmers via well structured and tax incentivised leasing arrangements are a must. We acknowledge that over the past couple of budgets, incentives and initiatives have been put in place to facilitate new, collaborative leasing and land restructuring arrangements. The inefficient practice of conacre needs to be disincentivised in favour of longer term leasing. Conacre presents a significant disincentive to young farmers attempting to establish and grow their farm enterprises as the active farmer has no fixity of tenure past eleven months, and thus, it is very difficult to access capital when you cannot be sure from year to year whether or not you will have access to the same piece of land and at what rent. Dare I say it, should we be calling for the three F's again that Michael Davitt and the land league agitated for back in 1850's? We need fixity of tenure for a reasonable period to ensure the farmer gets up and running. We need a fair rent that will continue for the operation of the lease and on renewal if both parties agree to extend the lease. The third F applies in certain circumstances where a farmer may have to hand over his lease agreement to a successor."

We are all aware of the statistics. There are more farmers over the age of eighty than under thirty-five. This is unbelievable. If those statistics were applied to any other profession, trade or sector there would be an outcry and proper provision made to address the serious imbalance.

We must also develop and promote more effective means of collaboration between farmers through partnerships, share farming and similar arrangements. These arrangements will establish a bond and strong relationship between the parties involved and lead to increased productivity.

A further symptom of the problem is that forty-eight per cent of full time farmers over the age of fifty do not have an identified farming successor. The main reasons given for not having an identified farming successor were that the farmer had no children (twenty nine per cent), or the children had no interest in farming (twenty per cent) or finally, the farmers had not reached a decision on which child to transfer the land to (twenty four per cent).

In Germany, eight per cent of farmers are under the age of thirty-five. In Ireland, seven per cent of farmers are under thirty-five. However, in Germany only seven per cent of farmers are over the age of sixty-five and in France only thirteen per cent are over the age of sixty-five. Compare this to Ireland where over twenty five per cent of our farmers are over sixty-five.

As President, I will work closely with the new Land Mobility Programme Manager , when appointed, our Chief Executive, Edmond Connolly, and our Agricultural and Rural Affairs Manager, Derry Dillon, to progress our work in this area. The Agricultural Affairs committee will have a key role to play as well and, additionally, the Young Farmer Development Groups will be encouraged to get actively involved.

The Young Farmer Development Group model will be developed and enhanced during my two years as President and will feed into our policies.

In the area of rural youth issues, the main priorities will be youth employment and the promotion of positive mental health among our members and young people generally.

The scourge of unemployment looms large in our country and invariably the small rural communities around Ireland are being decimated by unemployment and emigration. As President, I will highlight the needs of our members in these rural communities and we will work closely with organisations such as the National Youth Council of Ireland who have carried out significant research in the areas of unemployment and emigration and its impact on Irelands young people.

In addition, Macra na Feirme has been invited to participate in the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) as established by Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government Phil Hogan T.D. and Chaired by Pat Spillane who is a passionate advocate for the development of rural communities around Ireland. We will be making a submission to CEDRA before the end of June and will get involved to drive this worthwhile initiative forward.

The best way to ensure rural communities develop and are sustainable is by encouraging people to live in them. If the Government continues promoting jobs in the larger cities and particularly our capital city then the brain drain from rural areas will continue. Agriculture, yet again, will play a key role here either in main stream agricultural activity or in the area of on farm alternative enterprises. The time of the agri-entrepreneur has arrived.

The promotion of positive mental health will continue under my presidency. If you look at what we as an organisation do you could say that by joining Macra na Feirme and getting involved in your club activities you will develop as a person. Skills such as working with people from different backgrounds and points of view, organising and managing events, taking part in exercise with our sports competitions and developing the confidence to speak, act and perform in public will all help a person develop further.

This month is Green Ribbon month which is being used by SeeChange as a symbol for the promotion of positive mental health. Macra, as a partner organisation, is supporting the Green Ribbon campaign.

Of course, the competitions that we organise and participate in are very important and act as the single greatest way to recruit members and keep them involved. These are the activities that set us apart from many other organisations insofar as we have such a broad sweep of competitions from agricultural to public speaking to performing arts and sporting competitions. I want you all to keep participating and encouraging others to get involved and promote county/regional rounds in competitions. The advent of rainbow teams has worked well to pool resources in an area that may not have experience in a particular competition so that they can take part and experience it for themselves. Our competitions are excellent for forging friendships and relationships and are by their nature competitive.

We must not lose sight of the Macra ethos of respect for each other, the officials and the presiding officer when participating in competitions.

As President of Macra na Feirme I will work tirelessly in conjunction with each and every member to ensure our great organisation is one we can be proud of. You all have a part to play by continuing the great work you all do with enthusiasm and vigour. Positive and happy members will attract more members to join Macra. As your President I will leave no stone unturned to ensure that the interests of our members are always to the fore and that we continue to be the voice and representative body for young farmers and rural young people.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of the day and of course the inaugural red and black banquet tonight!