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Farming, Farts and Political Fighting: The DUP and UFU versus the Climate? – Part I

John Barry & Rebecca Stuttard

Northern Ireland finally joined the ranks of jurisdictions with Climate Change legislation when the Climate Change Act received royal assent on 6th June 2022. Its overarching target is for NI to reach Net Zero (NZ) greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2050. This target was the topic of dispute for many months in the Stormont Assembly, with DAERA Minister Poots, the DUP and the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) seeking to water it down in order to ease the pressure on the agricultural sector which accounts for the largest share of NI's emissions (27%). By and large, the 'battle of the two Climate Change Bills' was framed in the media and in the Assembly as 'farmers vs the climate'. Sections of the local media supported the UFU/DUP line prominently, more noticeably the Newsletter's 'Farming Life' weekly Saturday supplement, and the weekly BBC Radio Ulster 'Farming Matters' programme.

Why two Bills you might ask?

In July 2020, in the wake of the Assembly declaring a Climate ecological emergency in February that year, so after it was restored, the Assembly passed a motion calling on Minister Poots to introduce a Climate Change Act, with binding carbon reduction targets, within three months. During the debate, Poots said it was "ridiculous" to call for a comprehensive piece of legislation to be developed in just three months. Proving him wrong, Green Party MLA Clare Bailey, together with the Climate Change Coalition, chaired by QUB academic, Dr. Amanda Slevin, submitted a Bill in October 2020, with support from all Assembly parties bar the DUP and TUV, aimed at NI reaching Net Zero emissions by 2045.

Rather than seek to amend this Bill, Minister Poots decided to introduce his own, which he did in 2021. This set a target of 82% reduction by 2050, though he did later set a target for reducing CO₂ to NZ by 2050. Crucially, his Bill also sought less demanding reductions for methane, and to remove emissions from agricultural sources from the net zero target, all explicitly done in the name of 'protecting agrifood'.

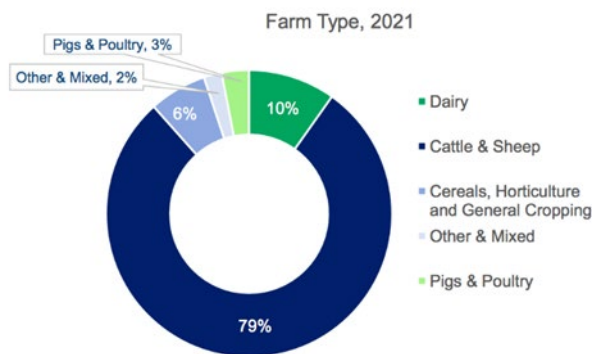
It was the minister's Bill, heavily amended and reflecting some key parts of the Bailey one, which eventually made it onto the statute books this summer. Poots' Bill, which was backed by the agri-food industry and the Climate Change Committee (CCC), included an emissions reduction target of 82% by 2050. CCC chief executive Chris Stark is on record as saying that the reason they approved lesser GHG targets for Northern Ireland is because of our 'very big agriculture sector'. And as we will see, the intervention of

both the CCC and its Chair, Lord Deben, played a significant role in the 'battle of the two Climate Bills'.

This 'farmers vs the climate' framing of the Bill was both unfortunate and unnecessary, being, in my judgement, politically manufactured, and does not bode well in terms of the implementation of the Act as GHG reduction targets are set for each sector of the economy. The logic here is simple – if farming has less GHG emissions targets reaching NZ will then require other sectors to take a larger share of emissions reductions. We may expect more inter-sectoral disagreement and debate as the Act is implemented.

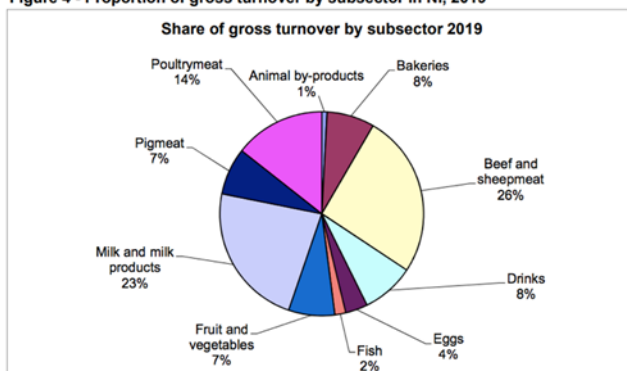
There are four pertinent points to bear in mind to orientate oneself on this issue. *The first* is that Northern Ireland is unique in a European context in having farming and land use as its major GHG emitting sectors. In other countries – and the rest of the UK – it is energy production that makes up the largest sector. Here the only other country in a similar position is the Republic where farming makes up over 40% of its emissions profile. Also unique is that in NI land use is a net producer of carbon, whereas in the other UK administrations, it is a carbon sink. *The second* more scientific point, which gets us to the heart of the issue, is that the main problem with the GHGs produced in agriculture is that the main one is methane. While most of us are perhaps aware of carbon dioxide (CO₂) as the main gas causing climate breakdown, the contribution of methane is less well known. Methane is a much more potent and powerful climate changing gas than CO₂. It is about 20 times more powerful, but does not last in the atmosphere as long. And where this gas comes from brings us to the *third* point. Methane comes from ruminant animals, in NI's case overwhelmingly cows, belching and farting. And why do we have so many cows? This has to do with the structure of the NI agricultural sector, which is overwhelmingly based on grass fed beef and dairy. According to the Department's latest estimates, there are 3,252 dairy farms with a total of 318,372 cows, and 14,179 beef farms with a total of 246,956 cows (meaning a lot more cows are packed into considerably fewer dairy farms than on the beef farms). Across the island of Ireland it turns out we are very good at producing grass...who knew?

Figure 2.4 Number of farms by farm type, 2021



Number of farms by farm type, 2021, DAERA, 2022

Figure 4 - Proportion of gross turnover by subsector in NI, 2019



The final point is that we are in a planetary crisis, with nature loss locally and globally increasing risks to ecosystems, natural resources and vital ecosystem services (as well as increasing the likelihood of future pandemics such as Covid-19). And the other element of the planetary emergency we now face is the climate crisis bringing with it an increase in storms, heatwaves and flooding and other extreme weather events. While you would be forgiven for not knowing or remembering, the NI Assembly in February 2020 declared a 'climate and ecological emergency'. Who knew?

'Listen to the science'

Both those promoting the more ambitious Bailey Bill and the weaker Poots one, all claimed science on their side. The UFU for example accused supporter of the Bailey Bill to 'listen to the advice of the CCC before it's too late'. UFU President, Victor Chestnutt went on to urge MLAs 'to come to their senses and realise the damage they will be contributing to should they back this ill-informed net zero target. They need to act in line with the advice they've been given to deliver for climate change instead of plucking figures out of a hat that would wipe out the rural economy and destroy rural areas'.

The role of the CCC was a significant intervention which not only helped solidify the ‘farmers vs the climate’ frame but also brought into sharp relief the uses and abuses of ‘science’ in the battle between the two climate Bills. In a letter to Minister Poots from Lord Deben, Chair of the CCC said that, in the Committee’s assessment, given Northern Ireland’s economic reliance on the agrifood sector and on the basis of NI’s disproportionate contribution to overall UK food production, an 82% cut in emissions by 2050 would be a ‘fair contribution’ to the UK’s wider net zero ambition. The CCC also said that there was no technical reason why Northern Ireland could not get to net zero, but it would mean a reduction in agricultural output. This was interpreted by the UFU as meaning the ‘ruination of NI agriculture’, with DUP Sammy Wilson going so far as to say the passing of the Bailey Bill by climate change ‘zealots’ would lead to ‘humans eating maggots’.

This advice from the CCC was used to attack the Bailey Bill as not in line with the science and to support the Poots Bill. However, ‘assessment’ and concepts such as a ‘fair contribution’, are *political judgements* and based on the CCC’s ‘assessment’ that faster changes cannot happen within the agricultural sector. This I would stress is an *interpretation of the science*, *NOT science-based evidence* or proof that only a less ambitious decarbonisation pathway is possible for land use and the agri-food system. In short, its politics *informed* by science, but at root a political judgement. And as a political judgement it is a perfectly legitimate claim to make. But to claim that this is ‘science’ as the minister, the DUP, the UFU, and members of the AERA committee did, in order to criticise those supporting the Bailey Bill as ‘unscientific’, is both wrong and disingenuous.

It is interesting to note, given Lord Deben and the CCC’s interest in ensuring ‘fair contributions’ to the UK NZ target, that it or he did not propose that the Yorkshire and the Humber region be given less stringent GHG emission reduction targets. Just as NI produces a disproportionate amount of UK food (and associated GHG emissions), likewise with Yorkshire and the Humber in terms of carbon energy intensive UK industrial manufacturing. But the CCC did not say that this region’s industrial sector should have less stringent emissions reductions targets as part of its ‘fair contribution’ to achieving the overall UK Net Zero by 2050 target. And likewise this was a political judgementnot a scientific one. And one may ask why?

A new future of farming?

Round one of Climate Change policy is now completed. Round two promises to be an even more fraught affair, not least with our largest emitting sector still determined to reconcile the impossible. The continuation of a ‘business as usual’ intensive, grass fed export oriented beef and dairy industrial model that is both unsustainable and incompatible with NZ targets, and dominated by large agri-food corporations. While those who support this

agri-food status quo look to as yet proven technological fixes, others, such as this author, can see that there are many solutions available. But they do require being honest with our farming communities about fundamentally changing and transforming the NI agri-food system, and helping them in that transition, ensuring a 'just transition' for agriculture. It is not agriculture that is incompatible with achieving science based targets; *it is agriculture as it is currently structured.*

Transitioning away from an intensive dairy and beef sector will be challenging, but not impossible, and more engagement with our farming communities will be needed in round two. Such engagement could focus on the many opportunities in the decades ahead for paying farmers to invest in 'nature based solutions', paying them to sequester carbon by planting trees and rewetting bogs, shift to agroecological and other 'climate friendly' forms of food production. After all, we need to remember that during the pandemic farmers were 'frontline workers' who provided us with food, and even more than that; farmers are stewards of the land. But as with other economic practices that are incompatible with effectively addressing our worsening planetary crisis, such as oil and coal extraction, we should rightly thank our farmers for all they have done for society in the post-war period when they were actively encouraged by the state to produce as much food as cheaply as possible. However, we need to be honest with them and while thanking them for their enormous service, that their 'business as usual' model of grass-fed, intensive beef and dairy farming is now coming to an end. But this is not the 'end of farming', just the 'end of farming as we know it'. And this fundamental change is what is also going to have to happen in each sector of the economy, so it's not only farming that will have to engage in this 'root and branch' transformation. There are no jobs on a dead planet, and no farming either.