

Getting Ireland's priorities right

Sir,

Mary Lou McDonald wishes to see a united Ireland in order to stimulate economic growth and create a Utopian island nation where all are equal.

At present the Republic of Ireland is enjoying unprecedented economic growth. Personal wealth (on paper at least) is at an all-time high and we have never had as many billionaires living among us.

Her call for a referendum to gauge the popular opinion would be ill advised. Most people in the Republic are too busy trying to find a good school for their children, juggling jobs to pay for inflated property prices, or are stuck in commuter traffic, to worry about partitioning of the nation.

There are some of us who live in the Republic who would love to have a health service as good as the one in Northern Ireland. Or drive on roads of pristine tarmac such as those enjoyed by our cousins north of the border.

Perhaps Mary Lou McDonald should concentrate on working to improve the public services and the lives of people in her own constituency of Dublin (where she was elected) before she tackles uniting Ireland.

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Safe food not fancy labels

By Ludger Fischer

The European Commission is currently working on the revision of food-labelling rules. At the same time, it is also looking into the harmonisation of regional quality labels, with a view to creating a European Quality Label.

SME food producers already have to include all necessary information on their products' labels, and are worried about any additional demands that may arise from these new pieces of legislation.

Speaking during a conference on Food Quality Certification, organised by the EC DG Agriculture in Brussels on 5 February, Health Commissioner Markos Kyprianou stated that all new legislation should take into account the restricted possibilities of small food producers.

German Consumer Affairs Minister Horst Seehofer said that food quality is of the utmost importance for everybody, and that responsibilities should be shared between producers and consumers. UEAPME welcomes these statements, and wishes to bring forward the point of view of its food-producing SMEs.

What are our main concerns about food labelling? First of all, we believe that the priority for the EU must be to provide adequate safe food, rather than focus solely on labels. Labels cannot be eaten. It is the food that produces the nourishment, and, in certain circumstances, the harm.

Secondly, UEAPME accepts that unbalanced or poor diets may contribute to increasing obesity and other health problems in European society. This will only be solved by education, not by excessive labelling requirements.

European rules already require that any food placed on the market be safe. For instance, some raw foods will carry advice on how to cook them and allergenic foods will carry a caution for those who may suffer reactions. There is no need to duplicate existing information.

Thirdly, UEAPME members believe that mandatory information on a food label should be minimal to ensure safety. Research shows that labels carrying too much information are actually counter-productive and misleading for the customer, a point that was also made by Agriculture Commissioner Marianne Fischer Boel, at the conference.

Logos and brand information should be voluntary and left to the discretion of the producer. Such information must not mislead, but should rather aim to provide additional knowledge for the target consumer.

Finally, price concerns are particularly worrying for small businesses. Any legislation change must properly address this issue. The Impact Assessment undertaken for the EC proposal to introduce mandatory nutrition labelling in November 2004 stated that training workshops for companies, particularly SMEs, are needed to "provide practical hands-on guidance on how to correctly describe nutritional information".

UEAPME believes that the true costs of any change to labelling regulations must be fully taken into account. Any legislation should be as simple and as realistic as possible in this respect.

Ludger Fischer is UEAPME Advisor on Food issues
EU Reporter would welcome comments from SMEs to Editor@EUReporter.co.uk