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Keeping cool in a crisis

WHEN Foot and Mouth Disease last struck in Britain six years ago, the outbreak caused more alarm in Ireland than across the water: naturally so, since the beef trade accounts for a much higher proportion of our national income than it does in Britain.

Our reaction to the crisis was also more rapid and more firm than that in the neighbouring island. The British authorities acted belatedly and uncertainly. The disease spread to such an extent that seven million cattle had to be slaughtered and the loss to the economy was estimated as £18bn (nearly €12bn).

Here, the most stringent precautions came quickly into place, with restrictions on the movement of animals and cancellations of numerous events.

Even the National Ploughing Championships were postponed. The policy worked. So did the similar measures implemented in Northern Ireland. Only a handful of cases occurred in the North, along with one single case in the Republic.

This time, we must hope that the British authorities have learned the lessons of 2001 and that there will be no repetition of the ruinous losses to beef farmers and the pictures of carcasses lifted by cranes onto funeral pyres.

It comes as a shock to learn that the evidence for the source of the outbreak in Surrey points to a Government laboratory. Expert analysis will have to determine whether that is correct, and what remedies must be applied to prevent a recurrence.

But the immediate question for Ireland is our defence. Fortunately, the most elaborate plans have been in place for many years.

Immediately on learning of the British outbreak, Agricultural Minister Mary Coughlan put the first instalment into operation. She announced a ban on imports of cattle, fresh meat and un-pasteurised milk from Britain.

Similar measures have been introduced in Northern Ireland, and the new regime there is working in the closest collaboration with the Republic.

If the crisis worsens, stricter controls will have to be imposed. Nobody wants to see a repeat of the loss and inconvenience suffered in 2001 but at the same time nobody will quarrel with them if the Department of Agriculture judges them necessary.

Six years ago the population, especially the rural population, co-operated very willingly. There is no reason to fear any difference if the

need for such precautions arises again.

They protected us before. Least of all would we wish to have to resort to the ultimate remedy, mass slaughter of animals.

Safety and the roads

FROM next Spring, motorcyclists will have to undergo compulsory training before taking to the road. The move, like so many measures of this kind, is long overdue. No other country in the European Union lacks a programme of compulsory training for drivers of trucks, cars and motorbikes.

The measures now proposed for bikers should of course apply to motorists and truck drivers as well. Bikers are particularly vulnerable.

They are six times more likely to be involved in a fatal crash than other categories of road users.

A 16-year-old can drive a motor bike without any guarantee of proficiency.

He or she was to pass a driving test but anyone who fails can carry on using a provisional licence, often several.

This points up the continuing scandal of the 400,000 drivers, including bikers, who have never passed a test.

No wonder that we have one of the worst road safety records in Europe. We are also behind in several other respects.

The Garda presence on the roads has visible increased but enforcement is still far from sufficiently rigorous.

We must press ahead with the motorway programme: they are safer, and it would be misguided to delay their completion on the pretence that it would be a painless way of restraining public spending.

Latest foot and mouth scare is the stuff of sci-fi nightmares



AILEEN SHEEHAN

IT'S like something out of science fiction – though the implications for farming and society could be far from entertaining.

The news that the unexpected outbreak of foot and mouth in Surrey has been traced back to the very epicentre of world controls for the disease has sent shock waves through the scientific and agricultural communities.

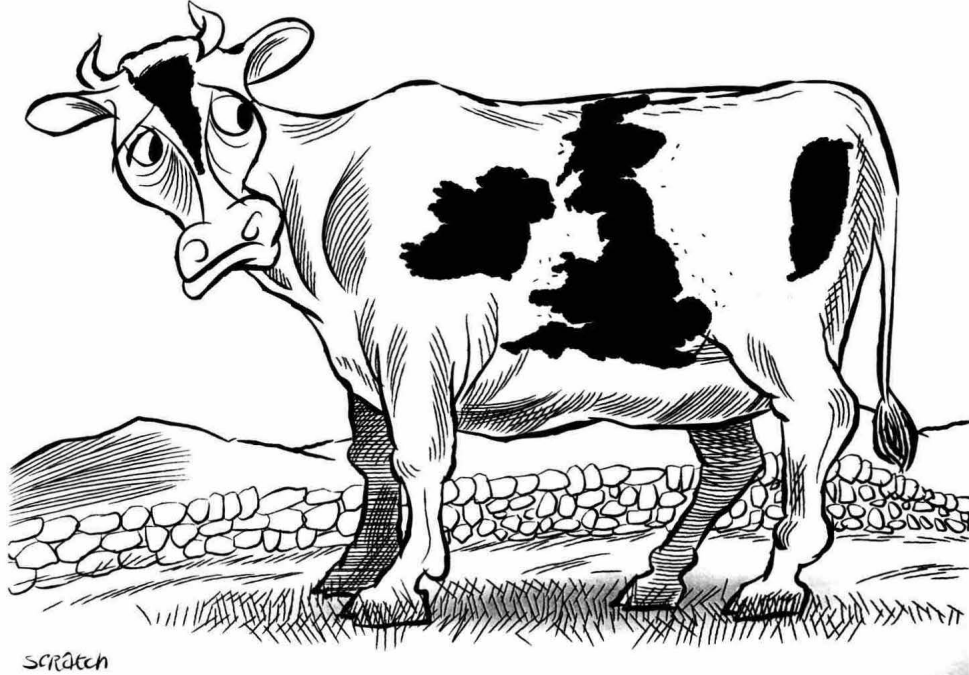
Paradoxically, it's actually good news for attempts to control this outbreak – the proximity of the infected farm to the Pirbright laboratory complex where the disease originated suggests a localised spread, which hopefully will make it easier to contain.

However, when news broke on Friday night that foot and mouth had again raised its ugly head in Britain, a shiver went through Irish society as memories resurfaced of the 2001 outbreak that plagued farming and brought social, sporting and cultural life to a virtual standstill.

Shoot-to-kill

Nowhere would this be more pronounced than on the Cooley peninsula in Co Louth, which, with the sole outbreak in the Republic, bore the brunt of the restrictions as its livestock were slaughtered and army rangers took to the hills with a shoot-to-kill policy for wild deer and goats.

The Irish authorities reacted with vigour and determination to halt the spread of the disease at that time, and put many new measures in place that will



stand to us now if the disease spreads further – such as much greater animal traceability and a halt to the merry-go-round of animals being sold and moved hither and thither for days on end.

However, the revelation that the EU's reference laboratory at Pirbright in Surrey – the very

place to which we send suspect samples of foot and mouth from Ireland and the rest of the world – is now being investigated as its source is like the plot of a chilling horror movie.

All through the foot and mouth crisis six years ago, the country used to wait with baited breath for the latest news

from Pirbright, as suspect samples were dispatched there to be subjected to the last word in state-of-the-art analysis.

The strain of foot and mouth found on the Surrey farm on Friday looks to have been found to be identical to that used at Pirbright in order to make the vaccines that is used in some

countries to protect against the disease.

It's a strain that harks back to the 1967 outbreak of the disease, but one no longer found in animals in many of the frequent worldwide outbreaks since then.

The plot thickens of course – and there's a second possible suspect – the US pharmaceutical company Merial, which shares a campus with the Pirbright Institute of Animal Health and manufactures large quantities of the vaccine.

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suspect – the US pharmaceutical company Merial, which shares a campus with the Pirbright Institute of Animal Health and manufactures large quantities of the vaccine.

Both sides are now trying to pass the buck – proclaiming the excellence of their biosecurity measures, but UK investigators

are on-site, with promises to identify the source within 48 hours. That's an unimaginably short timeframe for Irish people, who are more used to the simplest inquiries dragging on for years on end, but hopefully we will get answers.

Foot and mouth disease is notoriously easy to spread around. It is able to live in the ground for many months, and can be spread on car tyres, footwear and by animals, humans or food – not to mention the possibility of it being simply carried by the wind.

Unfortunately, that very resilience may make it harder to find out exactly how it spread in this case – whether through human error, malicious intent or a technical lapse.

However, the main ambition must be to stop it getting out again or spreading further.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's immediate return to London from his holidays this weekend to head up efforts to halt the disease's spread was an immediate welcome sign that his government will make this a priority.

Last time round, foot and mouth cost Ireland an estimated €200m. However, the misjudged, error-strewn response in Britain ended up costing them €12bn in farm losses and damage to tourism.

That's not counting the incalculable damage caused to agriculture there, as the prolonged outbreak sapped morale, symbolised by the horrific images of burning funeral pyres of a staggering seven million slaughtered animals.

Anxiety

In Ireland, farmers have been quick to point the finger of suspicion for foot and mouth at beef imports from Brazil – though their claims have been discounted by the revelations from Surrey. They are right that the potential failure of a flagship EU reference laboratory that gave rise to this case does not exactly inspire confidence in the EU authorities.

Moreover, they leave themselves open to the criticism of opportunism if they continue to beat the Brazilian drum.

Brown applies the lessons learned from Blair errors



NICHOLAS LEONARD

The long, frustrating years that Gordon Brown spent waiting to be prime minister are now paying off handsomely for him as he exploits the lessons he learned from Tony Blair's mistakes.

Brown has been in power for less than six weeks but he has already experienced a demanding series of unpredictable crises. As the son of a Church of Scotland minister, he may well feel that he is being subjected to some Old Testament-style treatment with the floods in the midlands now being followed by pestilence in the shape of foot and mouth disease.

One lesson which Brown learned from Blair is not to take holidays abroad.

He used to like going to Cape Cod but this year he opted for a stay in Dorset, which enabled him to make a rapid return to work when news of the foot and mouth outbreak reached him.

The Conservative leader, David Cameron, was due to go to France but postponed his

trip. He suffered severe damage to his image last month when he flew off to Africa at the height of the floods emergency.

"More cases of foot and mouth disease, racing cancelled and a growing sense of crisis. I told Tony Blair I had no sense of it being gripped properly and no confidence in the machinery of government."

That was Blair's legendary spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, writing in his diary back in February 2001 as the scale of the last foot and mouth outbreak became evident.

Campbell's scepticism about the competence of the then government was well-founded. His diary vividly recounts the growing sense of panic within Whitehall as the crisis developed.

By the end of it, some 7 million animals had been slaughtered, the economy was hit to the tune of €12bn and farmers received almost €8bn in compensation.

Gordon Brown was in charge of paying the bills at the time and he knows that Blair was

lucky not to suffer greater political damage, mainly because farming accounts for only one per cent of the economy and the whole process of producing food is somewhat unreal to the vast majority of voters who buy their meat and vegetables at the supermarket.

This time, Brown is determined it will be a different story. His farm minister, Hilary Benn, pointed to the prime minister's return from holiday as a sign that the government will be in control.

In reality, Brown cannot do much more than show the flag in a crisis that requires expert intervention.

But he can deal with the difficult political questions that will arise if it turns out, as seems probable, that the outbreak was caused by contamination from the two nearby official research and vaccine production units.

Brown has already had practical experience of intervening to help people affected by the floods crisis.

After his talks with them, he personally arranged for 900

portaloos to be dispatched to their region to deal with the disruption to sewage and sanitation.

There is no doubt that Brown's image has been helped by the way that he has responded to the series of crises in the past few weeks.

His spin doctors are cultivating a view of him as an early-to-bed, early-to-rise performer who starts ringing his colleagues and civil servants on his mobile while he is having breakfast with his family.

The opinion polls now look so good for Brown compared to his rivals that the speculation about an early general election in the autumn is becoming intense.

This suits Brown as it keeps his MPs on their toes and it destabilises the opposition. It is particularly difficult for the Tories, who are now having serious doubts about the ability of David Cameron to create a vote-winning package for what he takes to the country.

Poor Cameron, who was flavour of the month with the

electorate in the spring, is now paying a high price for having projected himself as the 'next Tony Blair'.

More Brown differentiates himself from Blair, the more voters see Cameron as just another fluent, light-weight spinner of words.

Brown's performance is more than just a matter of wearing a suit on all possible occasions, even wearing a formal jacket to chat to holiday-makers on the beach last week.

He pulled off a genuine achievement in New York when he persuaded the United Nations to make an unprecedented commitment to trying to halt the massive humanitarian crisis in Darfur and, when parliament returns from the summer holidays, he will tell MPs that the direct military role of UK forces in Iraq is about to come to an end.

The remaining 5,000 troops will be simply 'overseeing' the work of the Iraqi Army.

That leaves Afghanistan as a big unanswered question mark. The advice that Brown is getting

from his military top brass is gloomy. His political rival, Cameron, shares that pessimism.

More than 70pc of the UK troops last month, he warned that Nato could be defeated by the Taliban unless the military operations are better co-ordinated with reconstruction work.

That makes for an easy sound-bite, but turning it into reality is another matter. Almost 60pc do not have water-tight windows or roofs.

One powerful agent for social change, however, may turn out to be the rapid growth of the television industry.

TV sets were banned under the Taliban but more than two thirds of the population now tune in to western-style shows.

These may prove more effective at winning over hearts and minds than traditional propaganda about the advantages of liberal democracy.

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By Aideen Sheehan

August 6, 2007

[Sic] nightmares stand to us now if the disease spreads further - such as much greater animal traceability and a halt to the merry-go-round of animals being sold and moved hither and thither for days on end. Its resilience makes it harder to find out how it spreads

However, the revelation that the EU's reference laboratory at Pirbright in Surrey - the very place to which we send suspect samples of foot and mouth from Ireland and the rest of the world - is now being investigated as its source is like the plot of a chilling horror movie. All through the foot and mouth crisis six years ago, the country used to wait with baited breath for the latest news from Pirbright as suspect samples were dispatched there to be subjected to the last word in state-of-the-art analysis.

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