

# Irish State Forestry: Government Policy 1948-1959

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## ABSTRACT

This article covers the period from 1948 (the year the new policy was announced) to 1959 (the year in which the 25,000 acres planting target was first achieved), and deals specifically with the sequence of events culminating in the planting of 25,000 acres per year. Dail Reports and Official Reports of the Minister for Lands were examined, as well as those (very few) departmental files that have survived the intervening thirty odd years. Several organisations were approached — e.g. Department of An Taoiseach, Department of Foreign Affairs, Stationery Office, National Library etc. — all of which contributed generously to the information contained in this article.

The principal conclusions are as follows:

1. Before the election (February, 1948) which installed the first Inter-Party Government, a policy existed of planting 10,000 acres per annum over a 50 year period. The intention was to extend the national forest area to a total of 700,000 acres, including the privately owned estate (85,000 acres).
2. The new Government did adopt, in November 1948, a policy of planting 25,000 acres per annum over a 40-year period.
3. The latter programme represented new planting, i.e. 25,000 acres per annum on top of the then existing estate (about 170,000 acres).

Much (but not all) of the evidence for these conclusions appeared in the forestry estimate debates in the Dail Reports covering the years 1948 to 1959. For the purposes of this paper contributions from Ministers and ex-Ministers only will be quoted.

## INTRODUCTION

A few years ago the author served on a special working group to prepare a report to Government on the State Planting Programme. The purposes of the exercise was to review the achievement to date of the State Afforestation Enterprise and to re-appraise the case for the continuation of the planting programme. The task under-taken was to establish what had been the framework within which the Government made the 1948 decision ("to plant a million acres by annual increments of 25,000 acres") and to clarify whether the expressed target was meant to be on top of, or inclusive of, the 1948 existing estate.

It is worth recalling that the period under review was a period of unusually frequent changes in Government. Eighteen years of continuous Government by the Fianna Fail Party was ended in February 1948 with the formation of the first Inter-Party Government. Mr. Joe Blowick (Clann na Talmhan) became Minister for Lands and Mr. Sean MacBride, Clann na Poblachta (a central figure in the new policy announcement of December 1948) Minister for External Affairs. In May 1951, Fianna Fail formed the Government, with Mr. Tom Derrig as Minister for Lands. The second Inter-Party Government took office in early 1954, again with Mr. Blowick as Minister for Lands (Mr. MacBride was not a Minister in this administration). In March 1957, another change of Government saw Mr. Erskine Childers, Fianna Fail, appointed Minister for Lands.

Given that the highest State planting achievement in any year up to 1948 was 7,000 acres, one would reasonably have expected that the annual target announced in December 1948, of 25,000 acres per year, would have been preceded by a detailed appraisal by the responsible Department (Lands) and by the Department of Finance and, the Government. There is, however, no evidence that this happened; indeed, the policy was enunciated not by the Department of Lands but by the Department of External Affairs in just two brief paragraphs of a 35 page White Paper outlining Ireland's economic development plans 1949-1953 within the post-war European Recovery Programme.

### *The Pre-1948 Policy*

Mr. de Valera, then leader of the Opposition, in an interesting speech to the *1950-51 Forestry Estimate*, referred to the formation, in 1946, of the Fianna Fail Party's planting programme. The Party had, he said, a sub-committee sitting "to develop our programme of afforestation". The evidence presented to the sub-committee (he said) in 1946 by forestry advisors was to the effect that 600,000 acres of forest were needed "to supply not merely existing needs but foreseeable needs".

It was said, according to Mr. de Valera, that about 100,000 acres would be required, in addition, "for protective purposes", thus raising the total requirement to 700,000 acres. At that time (1946), the area under forests was 200,000 acres, comprising 115,000 acres owned by the State and 85,000 acres privately owned, so that a further 500,000 acres was required. The Party, therefore, adopted the objectives of reaching within three years a planting rate of 10,000 acres per annum and considered that "that was indicated as the figure which would, year after year, meet our requirements".

The *1948/49 Forestry Estimate* debate (8th and 9th June, 1948) pre-dated the White Paper (December 1948) referred to above and is therefore, perhaps, only of historical interest. It is clear from the debate that in the election (February 1948) campaign Clann na Talmhan had promised that 60,000 acres would be planted annually and, more incredibly, Clann na Poblachta had said they would plant one million acres in five years (an annual rate of 200,000 acres). In the debates he handled in the two Inter-Party Governments, the Minister (Mr. Blowick) received considerable "stick" from opposition speakers on foot of the 1948 election promises.

### *The 1948 Policy Decision*

The important document is a White Paper entitled "The European Recovery Programme: Ireland's Long Term Programme (1949-1953)". This incidentally, proved to be elusive and attempts to trace it in the Department of Fisheries and Forestry and in the Department of An Taoiseach as well as in Government Publications and the Stationery Office were unsuccessful. After establishing its existence in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, a copy of the White Paper was finally obtained in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

The European Programme (ERP) was a complicated post-war European recovery procedure which originated in 1947 with a speech made by the United States Secretary of State (Marshall). The procedure agreed, under what was called the "Convention for European Economic Co-Operation", in Paris in April 1948, and debated in the Dail in June 1948, had two aspects, viz. aid to European countries by the USA and a form of what was termed "self-help" by the participating countries. The foreword to the White Paper sets out the background to, and the elements of, the programme prepared by the Irish Government. Paragraphs 48 and 49 (Page 22) of the 35 page programme deal with "reafforestation" and are as follows:

48. During the war years Ireland's stock of soft woods was depleted by 60 per cent; this depletion, taken in conjunction with the country's requirements of timber, renders it imperative to engage in large-scale reafforestation. While this will not bring any immediate results (save in so far as it provides employment) it forms part of Ireland's long-term planning.
49. So far, reafforestation has been carried out only on a very small scale; in recent years, the rate of planting in the State Forests has been approximately 6,000 acres per year. It is

proposed to step this up to 25,000 acres per year. The aim will be to plant a million acres by annual increments of 25,000 acres. At maturity, and assuming an average yield of 3,500 cubic feet of timber per acre on a 50 year rotation, the annual return on a 25,000 acres felling will be of the order of 87.5 million cubic feet or approximately 350,000 standards of sawn timber.

The paper was "Presented to both Houses of the Oireachtas by the Minister for External Affairs" (Mr. Sean MacBride).

No specific debate took place in the Dail on this White Paper (dated 20th December 1948). The first Dail reference to a 25,000 acre annual programme took place on March 10th, 1949 when Mr. McEntee (Fianna Fail), in a crisp comment on the Minister's reply to a question on the area acquired for State forestry in the year ended 28th February 1949, said "We are a long way from the 25,000".

In the following month (April 27th, 1949), when introducing the *1949/50 Forestry Estimate* the Minister (Mr. Blowick) referred to "the increased programme of 25,000 acres a year recently announced". Mr. Moylan (Fianna Fail) — Mr. Blowick's predecessor as Minister for Lands — said "I fully approve that policy, and anything this Party can do to help will be done, and we wish the idea every luck in the world". During that debate the Minister referred to the new policy decision on at least five occasions. At one point he said "since the Government finally decided upon embarking on the 25,000 acres programme, and since other steps were taken, the acreage coming in is very satisfying to me".

In the *1950/51 Forestry Estimate* debate (23rd May, 1950) the Minister refers to the position "when we decided to increase the planting programme from in the neighbourhood of 5,000 or 6,000 acres per year to 25,000 acres". Later he said "until we have 1,000,000 to 1,250,000 acres of forestry we cannot say that we have the land working to its maximum output".

### *The Land Survey*

There is a need, if only for historical accuracy, to dispel the idea that the eventual estate size target derives from a land survey carried out by the Department of Lands. This is a misconception which surprisingly — in the light of the evidence — appears to have become pretty widespread in the 1950s. It is clearly on official records that in 1956 the Minister for Lands understood that the figure of 25,000 acres was not related to any assessment of the future timber requirements of this country but flowed mathematically from a fixation of an ultimate forest acreage target of  $1\frac{1}{4}$  million

acres by reference to the fact that a cursory survey of potential forest land carried out by his Department indicated the availability of some 1,200,000 acres of such land.

In the Official Report of the Minister for Lands covering the four years 1st April 1953 to 31st March 1957 it is stated "in 1948, following a national survey of potential forest land, it was decided that the rate of afforestation should be expanded as rapidly as possible and that the target should be a planting rate of 25,000 acres per annum".

These statements are not correct. The Minister, (Mr. Blowick), speaking in the Dail on 28th April, 1949, said "shortly after I came into office I asked the Forestry Department to set about making a survey of land suitable and available for forestry all over the country". The Department's relevant file (one of the few files traced from that period) clearly shows that the survey did not begin until January 1949 and was not completed until January 1950. The result of the survey was announced by the Minister for Lands in an estimate (1950/51) speech on May 2nd 1950 when he said that the area (1,200,000 acres) is not "to be taken as the limit of plantable land but should be regarded as the minimum". The point is that the survey post-dated the White Paper of 20th December 1948 and, therefore, could not, of course, have contributed to the decision. The sequence was: first the decision to plant 25,000 acres per annum, then the land survey, then the request for FAO advice (culminating in the "Cameron Report") on the conclusions of the survey.

### *The Cameron Report*

The Cameron Report (the FAO Report on Forestry Mission to Ireland", 15th February, 1951) is referred to on several occasions in the Dail Reports 1951-1959. For reference purposes the important paragraphs relevant to the subject of this article appear in the Foreword (first paragraph) and at Page 14 (paragraph 20) of that report. In the Foreword it is stated "In February 1950 the Government of Ireland notified the Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organisation that as a part of its long-term programme of economic development a policy decision had been taken involving the establishment of 25,000 acres of new forestry plantation annually over a period of 40 years". Paragraph 20 of the Report notes that "there is no overall definition of forestry policy embodied in the legislation in Ireland, such as might be expected in the Forestry Act 1946", and goes on to quote the relevant paragraphs from the White Paper (although Cameron does not call it that) of 1948.

Regretably, all efforts to trace the letter sent in February, 1950 by the Irish Government to the FAO ended in failure. The FWS Secretariat file dealing with the Cameron Report cannot be traced and the Departments of An Taoiseach and of Foreign Affairs have no record of any relevant papers.

### *Subsequent Forestry Estimate Debates*

In May 1951 there was a change of Government and the new Minister for Lands (Mr. Derrig) had an easy passage with the *1951/52 Forestry Estimate*.

In introducing the *1952/53 Forestry Estimate*, on July 1st 1952, Mr. Derrig referred to "insistent and unrelenting pressure on my Department to increase the planting rate at all costs". Mr. MacBride spoke in this debate — the first time he did so on forestry in the Dail in the period researched. He said "the Inter-Party Government agreed on a plantation target of 25,000 acres a year".

The Minister's reply to the debate is interesting in that he refers to "the document issued by the Minister for External Affairs as a White Paper to the ERP on December 20th 1948" as being the first public pronouncement regarding the 25,000 acre programme and "for which I cannot find any authority at all from the technical officers responsible to me". He went on: "The Department of Lands know nothing officially about it. No official authorisation had been given by that Department to that programme and it was only during the following year that the then Minister, now sitting at the other side of the House, stated to the Forestry Division that the Government had adopted a planting programme of not less than 25,000 acres".

On 29th March 1955, Mr. MacBride spoke to the *1954/55 Supplementary Estimate on Forestry*. By this time the Inter-Party Government was back in office, again with Mr. Blowick as Minister for Lands. (Mr. MacBride was not a Minister in this Government). He (Mr. MacBride) said "In 1948 I was instrumental in getting the then Government to come to a firm decision that a minimum plantation rate of 25,000 acres per annum should be embarked upon. That decision was not merely a Government decision; it was a decision which received the approval of this House and one which was embodied in the long-term programme prepared in connection with the spending of Marshall Aid. That policy was published in one of the White Papers approved by this House at that time". He went on to quote Paragraph 49 of the 1948 White Paper.

In the context of planting policy the 1956 Dail Reports are interesting because of (a) the Minister's contribution to the *1956/57 Forestry Estimate* debate and (b) a motion of Afforestation moved

in November of that year by Mr. MacBride. In introducing the Estimate on July 11th 1956 the Minister for Lands (Mr. Blowick) made a lengthy speech in the course of which he reviewed the progress of State afforestation in four main periods viz. 1904-1922, 1922-1934, 1934-1950 and 1950-1956. It is notable that the Minister described the beginning of the third period, i.e. 1934, as being "marked by the settlement of an annual planting target of 10,000 acres", whereas Mr. de Valera's speech of May 17th 1956 (see Pre-1948 Policy above) seemed to imply that this policy was formed in 1946.

Mr. Derrig, former Minister, in his speech to the same debate said "The White Paper the Minister referred to was presented in connection with the American aid programme". He went on "The White Paper on ERP, issued by the Minister for External Affairs on 20th December 1948, contained the first public pronouncement about a 25,000 acres per annum programme. It was in that setting that it was announced. As far as I know, and I made enquiries about the matter when I held office as Minister for Lands, no firm directive was given to the Department in regard to the implementation of that programme for a considerable time afterwards".

Later on in his speech the Minister (Mr. Blowick) said "I am . . . in a position to tell the House that not merely is it the intention to increase the planting rate this year by 2,500 acres to 17,500 acres, but that each succeeding year will be marked by a similar big increase until the 1948 target of 25,000 acres is reached".

Mr. MacBride's motion (November, 1956) sought to commit Dail Eireann "to plant a minimum of 1,000,000 acres at a rate of not less than 25,000 acres per year". He reviewed again the 1948 White Paper and stated "in the light of the lack of progress it is desirable, I think, to try to remove doubts as to what our target is". Mr. Blowick, Minister, however, moved an amendment to the motion which said "Dail Eireann . . . agrees that hereafter there should be an annual increase of 2,500 acres in the rate of planting until an annual planting rate of 25,000 acres shall have been attained, whereupon consideration shall be given to the future rate of planting to be pursued, in the light of our forest and general economic requirements". The motion as thus amended was agreed to by the Dail on 5th December 1956. The effect of the amendment was to remove the explicit obligation to continue to plant 25,000 acres each year until 1,000,000 acres had been planted.

In April 1957 following another change of Government, the 1957/58 *Forestry Estimate* was introduced by a new Minister, Mr. Childers, Fianna Fail, (Mr. Derrig had died the previous November). In a cautionary note he said "it is questionable whether this small

country, with limited capital resources, with problems of a considerable excess of imports over exports and a plethora of other economic difficulties can really justify a steadily increasing annual capital investment in afforestation which is already close to the level of £2,000,000 a year”.

Mr. Childers made a significant speech in June 1958, in introducing the *1958/59 Forestry Estimate*, when he promised that the 25,000 acre planting target would be reached the following year. His speech draws heavily on a 1956 study by Mr. Henry Gray, Assistant Secretary of the Forestry Division of the Department of Lands (“the memorandum prepared is I think unique — being possibly the first overall projection of income and costs prepared for an entire country’s forestry operations”). Mr. Gray’s study represented State forestry’s input to a comprehensive set of proposals (“Economic Development”) formulated by Mr. T. K. Whitaker, Secretary of the Department of Finance, as a basis for the Government’s 1958 Programme for Economic Expansion. Mr. Childers stated “total employment on State forestry work will rise slowly to 6,000 by about 1968 and then more rapidly to 7,000 in 1974 and to 9,000 in 1978”.

Commenting on policy (“a planting programme of 25,000 acres from 1959 onwards”) he said “we have 246,885 acres of land planted at the moment” and “present policy provides for the planting of 1,000,000 acres, one-seventeenth of our total land area. At current rates of timber consumption we would need to plant 7,000 acres a year — at Danish rates 17,500 acres. In either event we will have a large export surplus”.

(The speech abounds with items of interest to students of Irish forestry — the expectation of financial breakeven in 1974, the return of 5¼% on capital invested, forestry employment “rising eventually to 20,000 persons”, the introduction of the bonus incentive scheme for forest workers, etc.)

### *Conclusions on Government Policy 1948-1959*

#### *(a) Annual Planting Rate*

There is no doubt that the Government decided in December 1948 on a planting programme of 25,000 acres per annum until 1 million acres of *new plantations* had been established. It is at least uncertain that this decision was preceded by any systematic analysis of the implications (expenditure, revenue, employment, self-sufficiency in wood, availability of suitable land). The Department of Lands did not contribute to the decision — the Land



Survey undertaken by the Department post-dated the policy announcement. The annual planting policy of 25,000 acres was not countermanded by any of the four Governments in office during the period 1948 to 1959.

(b) *The Eventual Target Area*

The 1948 Government decision was to plant 1 million acres. This was clearly new planting (made explicit, according to Cameron, in the Government's letter to FAO in February 1950), i.e. on top of the then (1948) estate (about 170,000 acres). This perhaps is the first source of the 1.2 million acres, i.e. 1,170,000 acres — or nearer to 1.25 million acres if the 85,000 acres of private plantations are included.

Coincidentally, the Land Survey by the Department of Lands, completed in January 1950 came up with 1.2 million acres (precisely 1,201,915 acres) of suitable forestry land.

While the research covered in this paper failed to establish either the source of the basis of the ultimate estate size target envisaged by the Government in 1948 — whether it was, 1, 1.2 or 1.25 million acres — it cannot, of course, be concluded that no basis existed. Indeed, as far back as 1908 the Report of the Departmental Committee on Irish Forestry “Presented to Parliament by Command of His Majesty” concluded that “a total possible forest area of 1,000,000 acres was available in this country”.

This ultimate target was effectively countermanded by the amended motion passed by the Dail, as described above, on December 5th 1956, although the Minister for Lands (Mr. Childers) said eighteen months later (June 1958) “present policy provides for the planting of 1,000,000 acres”.

*Postscript*

The research (such as it was) described above was, of course, only peripheral to the Report on the Planting Programme presented to Government in 1982. The Government responded to the report on 18th August, 1982 by confirming as an overall policy objective the maintenance of an annual planting target of 10,000 hectares (but now including reforestation and the planting of privately-owned land).