

The Argentine Countryside Strike of 2008: the Success of a 'Large Interest Group' and the Irish-Argentine Dimension

By John Kennedy

Abstract

Against a backdrop of increasing prices for agricultural commodities on international markets, driven by a confluence of factors, including increased demand particularly from the growing economies of Asia and a rise in the use of bio fuels, the Argentine Government in March 2008 levied a new variable export tax on soybeans, sunflowers, wheat and maize. No account was taken of the parallel steep increase in input prices. The measures were considered punitive by the four key interest groups that represent the sector: The Argentine Rural Society (SRA), Argentine Agrarian Federation (FAA), the Confederation of Argentine Rural Societies (CRA) and the Inter-cooperatives Association (CONINAGRO). Despite the heterogeneity of these groups, as they historically represented divergent elements of the socio-economic and political spectrum, they joined together under the auspices of an umbrella group, the Liaison Commission, to call for a countryside strike. Only once before, in 1970, did these groups unite to challenge government policy. The strike was to last 128 days, ending in the withdrawal of the tax by the Government. Although the key focus of the strike was export taxation, it also exposed many other grievances in the rural sector, which motivated even those not directly affected by the measure to protest against what they perceived to be a Government that was unsympathetic to the countryside, as well as urban dwellers concerned about the style of government. The analysis that follows will conceptually examine the strike in the context of the generic theories of interest group behaviour developed by the political scientist and economist Mancur Olson (1932-1998). Special reference will be made both to the role of Irish-Argentines, in a historical and contemporary context, in the interest groups, and their involvement in the strike.

Background

After many failed attempts, the constitution that forms the basis of modern Argentina came into effect in 1853. Soon after Buenos Aires left the Confederation and after its return in 1860 further reforms were made to the constitution, establishing a federal system of government. Under Article 4 of the reformed constitution, the Federal Government was granted the exclusive right to levy import and export taxes to finance the expenditure of the nation. Since their introduction, import and export taxes have been a ubiquitous feature of the Argentine taxation system. By the end of the 1880s, export and import taxes represented 80 per cent of the Federal Government's revenue (Barsky & Dávila 2008:146). The levying of a specific export tax was first introduced under the presidency of Bartolomé Mitre in 1862 and such taxes were sporadically imposed at various times over the subsequent 129 years. (From an Irish perspective, it is interesting to note that President Mitre's great-grandfather on his

maternal side, Roberto Wertherton, was from Ireland (MacLoughlin 2006)). Under the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989-1999), they were abolished in 1991. However, following the economic crisis of 2002 they were again resurrected and applied to the main agricultural products to finance the budget deficit and fund social programmes such as *Jefes de Hogar* (1). Nestor Kirchner, president from 2003 to 2007, continued with such a policy, increasing export duties twice between January and November 2007. By the end of his tenure taxes reached 35 per cent of the international price for soybeans, 32 per cent for sunflowers, 28 per cent for wheat and 25 per cent for maize.

The new system of export taxation introduced through Resolution 125/08 on 11 March 2008 by the Economy Minister Martín Lousteau in the newly formed Government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, was based on a sliding scale so that taxes would increase or decrease to reflect the Free on Board price (2) (F.O.B). Based on the F.O.B. price for March 2008, the export duty for soybeans would rise

to 44.4 per cent and for sunflowers to 39.1 per cent. For maize and wheat the export duty would fall by a little less than a percentage point, to 24.2 per cent and 27.1 per cent respectively. Lousteau justified these new measures on the basis that they were 'intended to strike a better balance in the farming sector by decoupling international and domestic prices, which would increase production and enable the country to increase exports and provide what the world requires, while at the same time providing food products at reasonable prices to Argentine families.'

In reaction to the announcement, the four key interest groups representing the agricultural sector: SRA, CRA, FAA and CONINAGRO convened a nationwide strike, by which farmers suspended the supply of grain, meat and milk, to protest at the Government's policy. This collective action was accompanied by demonstrations, *tractorazos* (3) and road blocks in the key agricultural provinces. Other groups with grievances also joined in the protests, such as the workers from meatpacking plants in Mar de Plata who demanded greater quotas for exporting meat. With no response forthcoming from the Government, the protests intensified with *cacerolazos* (4) organised by urban dwellers sympathetic to the countryside springing up in the major cities. The Government in turn organised counter-protests. Whilst some minor modifications to the plan were made, the measures were deemed unsatisfactory by the strikers.

The protests continued over the coming months with intermittent lock-outs and demonstrations, such as one in Rosario where it is estimated that over '200,000 attended' (Barsky & Dávila 2008: 237). The conflict worsened in late May with the arrest of eight farmers accused of blocking a road in San Pedro, Buenos Aires province. Incidentally the federal prosecutor in the case was an Irish-Argentine, Juan Murray. In an effort to break the deadlock, the president referred Resolution 125 to Congress for approval. With some modifications, the plan was approved by the Chamber of Deputies (lower house) by 129 votes in favour, 122 against and 2 abstentions.

Among those who voted against were two deputies of Irish extraction: Eduardo Kenny of La Pampa and José Ignacio García Hamilton of Tucumán. To become law, the measure had also to be adopted by the upper house, the Senate. In the event of a tie, it is the role of the vice-president of the Federal Republic who is also the Senate leader to cast the deciding vote. On 17 July 2008, the Senate vote tied and Julio Cobos, Vice President and leader of the Senate, cast the deciding vote rejecting an increase in grain export taxes. The measure was shortly afterwards rescinded by the Government.

In his seminal work, *The Logic of Collective Action*, Olson argued that collective action by large groups, as manifested during the countryside strike, would be difficult to achieve, as large groups are less likely to act in their common interest than small ones. The basis of his rationale was that individuals in large groups will gain relatively less per capita from successful collective action, whereas individuals in small groups will gain relatively more. Hence, there are weak incentives for large groups to organise. If such groups were to organise it would take them longer as they would find it difficult to agree on what type of collective good to pursue. Whilst this theory may have had some merit in explaining the evolution and achievements of Argentine agricultural interest groups in a historic context, the success of the countryside strike, which drew together such disparate groups in coordinated action in such a short timeframe, largely invalidates such a hypothesis in the contemporary era.

Irish-Argentines and Agriculture

During the major wave of Irish emigration to Argentina from the 1840s to 1890s, a substantial proportion of immigrants settled in the countryside. Coming from a background of tenanted smallholding in the midlands and southeast of Ireland, they were lured by the prospect of land ownership. Initially they established themselves in the sheep-breeding sector as wage labourers, sharecroppers or tenants as it required less start-up capital (Sabato & Korol, n.d.). As they accumulated financial capital, over time many Irish

immigrants progressed to become *estancieros* (ranchers), or mid-sized landholders. Some, such as Eduardo Casey and the Duggan brothers of Chacabuco, were at the forefront of cattle breeding. Others, such as Guillermo Mooney of Chivilcoy, were early proponents of mechanisation.

Due to their position, many Irish landowners advanced to positions of membership of the SRA and leadership in their rural communities, and were often instrumental in the formation of local Rural Societies. Besides land ownership Irish Argentines became involved in the provision of ancillary services to the agricultural sector, such as livestock and land auctioneering. This involvement continues to the present day, a good example being the significant number of the auction houses at Liniers (5) livestock mart having links to the Irish-Argentine community, including Lynch y CIA S.R.L, Lalor S.A.C.M and F. Gahan y CIA. S.A. Many Irish-Argentines are also involved in the supply of services and inputs that have emerged in recent decades. Given the number of Irish-Argentines involved in all areas of the agricultural supply chain, it was unsurprising that many played a prominent role in the countryside strike either as members of the interest groups, principally the SRA and CRA, or as independent protestors known as *autoconvocados*. Their active participation was also accompanied by unequivocal editorial support for the strike in *The Southern Cross*, the newspaper for the Catholic Irish-Argentine community.

Underlying developments and their contribution to the success of the strike

Since the mid 1990s, Argentina's agricultural sector had undergone a major transformation both in terms of the nature of agricultural production and the structure of the sector. Paradoxically, while these changes have tempted the Government to intervene to a greater degree through taxation and other measures, they have also made such actions much less likely to succeed. One can argue that they made the effectiveness of collective action of a large group more likely. Furthermore the hegemony of power by the Executive arm of

Government, which became very apparent during the strike, has led to a political debate about the form of governance, the meaning of federalism and the transparency and role of the institutions of state. What follows is a more in-depth analysis of these key developments.

Structural factors

Over the last thirty years there has been a radical change in the way tillage has been carried out in Argentina. Conventional tillage, which includes activities such as annually ploughing the soil and inter-row cultivation, has been replaced to a large extent by direct sowing. Under direct sowing the seed is planted directly into the soil by a mechanical seeding machine. In parallel, the introduction of the herbicide glyphosate by Monsanto in the 1970s, which was less toxic than other varieties, enabled direct sowing to become a viable proposition. By the end of the 1980s, over 92,000 hectares had been planted using this method (Barsky & Dávila 2008: 42). The fall in the price of glyphosate in the late 1990s made direct sowing even more popular in Argentine farming circles.

Advances in the development of genetically modified crops in the 1990s led to the introduction of soybeans resistant to glyphosate, known as *Roundup Ready*® (RR) in 1996. This innovation enabled farmers to spray the herbicide on the crops without causing them harm. In addition, the cost of herbicides for RR soybeans was lower than for those used in traditional no-till systems. By 2001, RR constituted 90 per cent of all soybean varieties planted in Argentina (Barsky & Dávila 2008: 43). Analogous to the spread of soybeans was the emergence of double-cropping. This allows farmers to sow a double crop; wheat and a short-cycle variety of soybean, thereby maximising income. This led to the rapid diffusion of soybean production in Argentina and small farmers in particular began to rely heavily on this crop as part of a profit-maximisation strategy, in order to contribute to the (short-term) economic viability of their farms (Trigo & Cap 2006: 5). Due to Government intervention in the livestock

sector, which has reduced prices, and the low regulated price for milk, many larger farmers also engaged in soybean and wheat production to increase profitability. As a consequence there has been a convergence of interests between smaller and larger farmers, creating a nexus for coordinated action.

There have also been structural changes in the forms of land ownership, and the land and the actors involved in the supply. As Bisang (2008) observes, Argentine agriculture is no longer vertically integrated, it outsources production, forming networks of sub-contractors (similar to an industry supply-chain). Although the practice of leasing land had largely disappeared by the 1970s, it is now once again a common feature of the agriculture scene. Typically, smaller property-owning producers are also renting to enable them to expand and benefit from cash crops and economies of scale. Another type of producer, known as a *contratista-tantero* (a non-property owner), rents the land from a third party for one harvest and pays a fixed price or part of the production. A vibrant industry in service contracting has also emerged, such as machinery contracting services for sowing, harvesting and spraying herbicides. A number of Irish-Argentines contract such services, such as Donaldo Kelly e Hijos SRL in La Plata, who offers direct sowing, fertilising, spraying and other services and Tomás Deveraux of San Antonio de Areco, who offers direct sowing services.

Sowing Pools

Beginning in the early 1990s, a new feature of agricultural organisation began to appear; sowing pools (*pools de siembra*). Due to a paucity of capital for the expansion of large-scale cereal production, the sector began to seek speculative investment funds as a source of financing, obviating reliance on the banking sector. The key features of a pool are: the organiser of the pool develops a business plan and offers it to potential investors; land is leased from a third party; the work is done by contractors from the area; and marketing is done through certain buyers, manufacturers or exporters. Generally the risk inherent in

agricultural production is managed through diversification of products and locations. During the 1990s there was a significant growth of pools as an investment vehicle. More recently, factors including the banking crisis of 2001, the low opportunity cost of capital and an increase in the prices of some cereals have made the sowing pools even more commonplace. Many middle-class urban dwellers have invested in these pools, thereby creating a symbiotic relationship with the countryside which was perhaps a significant factor in urban support for the strikers.

Co-participation

Argentine fiscal federalism (6) is characterised by a severe vertical fiscal imbalance (7). While the provincial governments have responsibility for the collection of taxes on income, consumption and wealth, in practice they have delegated responsibility to the Federal Government under co-participation arrangements. These arrangements were given formal status in 1988 under Law 21,548, which established that the Federal Government would retain 42 per cent of these taxes while 57 per cent would be distributed among the provinces, with the remaining 1 per cent set aside to finance unforeseen crises in the provinces. Further legal protection was accorded to the principle of co-participation through its inclusion in the Constitution in 1994. The Argentine system of fiscal federalism 'is considered to be very inefficient by all specialists' and 'its system of intergovernmental transfers does not correspond to any economic criteria' (Tommasi, Saiegh & Sanguinetti 2001: 147). It became evident during the countryside strike that there was a general concern about the manner in which these intergovernmental transfers were managed and that state governments would not automatically benefit from the additional tax from the export taxes.

The history and dynamics of the four key agricultural interest groups and Irish-Argentine influences

Argentine Rural Society (SRA)

The Argentine Rural Society (SRA), which brings together the interests of landowners and

producers, has the longest pedigree of any of interest groups involved in the strike. Established in 1866 during the presidency of Bartolomé Mitre, the key movers behind its creation were large landowners from the Pampas, led by José Martínez de Hoz, Jorge Temperley and Ricardo B. Newton. This group had 'also interests in commerce, finance and other urban investments, particularly in the city of Buenos Aires' (Barsky & Dávalia 2008: 107). It was in essence, as Sesto (2005: 51) points out, the institutionalisation of a circle of friends who were pioneers in livestock breeding. From the early days membership was dominated by *estancieros*. The SRA began to exert a very powerful influence on government policy. The address by the president of the SRA at each year's annual fair in Palermo became 'a barometer of how the incumbent politicians stood *vis-à-vis* the country's most powerful interests' (Lewis 1992: 22). In an analysis by Smith (1969), five of the eight Argentine presidents between 1910 and 1943 were members of the SRA, four vice-presidents, four finance ministers and for the most part the foreign affairs and agriculture ministers were also members. With the ascent of Juan Perón to power, the SRA lost much of its influence and was 'also forced to subsidise the populist policies of the new regime, which continued under subsequent Radical Governments' (Manzetti 1992: 601).

In response to the changing political landscape from 1943 onwards, the SRA began to broaden its membership beyond its core base of *estancieros*. An examination of the history of the first seventy-seven years of the SRA's existence gives some weight to Olson's theory that smaller interest groups are quicker to organise and more effective in their pursuit of collective goods. Today the organisation has ten thousand members. Whilst traditionally it represented the livestock sector, in recent years, its membership has also evolved to include agriculture producers and dairy farmers. Although none of its founders were of Irish origin, as the Irish were at that time in the process of establishing their foothold on the land property ladder, those that became *estancieros* would later join the Society. Since its

foundation there have been three presidents of the SRA with Irish roots: Dr Emilio Frers Lynch (1908–1910) who was also the first Argentine minister of agriculture; his son Enrique G. Frers (1950–1954) and Guillermo Alchouron (1984–1990) who has Irish ancestry on his maternal side. In the contemporary era, Eduardo Ramos, who is Vice-President and is responsible for political campaigns, has Irish links through his grandmother's side. Mercedes Lalor, who comes from an Irish-Argentine family prominent in the agricultural sector, joined the board as director last September, the first woman in its history to do so.

Argentine Agrarian Association (FAA)

Following the fall of the Rosas regime, the colonisation of Santa Fe province began. During the period between 1858 and 1895, the population of the province grew from 41,000 to 395,000 (Barsky & Gelman 2005: 127), in the process becoming the granary of Argentina, producing wheat, maize and linseed. As the colonies evolved, many of the entrepreneurs sold land to small farmers, known as *chacareros*, and these either co-existed with or were absorbed into the colonies. The predominant emigration to the rural areas was Italian. Consequently, the area became known as the *pampa gringa*. With the spread of the colonisation process to the south of the province, the structure of land ownership also began to change and the granting of land ownership became a less formal feature of the settlement process. This resulted in a rise in lease-holding and sharecropping. Similar trends began to emerge in the south of Córdoba province.

After the spike in land prices in the 1880s and their subsequent collapse in the 1890s, many immigrants decided not to invest in land ownership and to rent instead. The failure of the harvest in 1911 meant that the *chacareros* could not cover their debts to various intermediaries such as the general stores, who had given them credit until the harvest. A bumper harvest in 1912 led to an over-supply in the market and this, combined with a decrease in demand, meant that the price

collapsed. Together with the previous indebtedness and a rise in the price of inputs, this exacerbated the problems of the *chacareros*.

The high rates of interest they had to pay, previous indebtedness and the rise in the price of agricultural inputs gave origin to a protest movement which culminated in an assembly of farmers at the Italian Society in the town of Alcorta in 1912 (Barsky & Gelman 2005: 127), known as '*el grito Alcorta*' (the declaration of Alcorta). This led to the creation of the FAA, which was a seminal event in that it represented the creation of a competing pressure group to the SRA. Manzetti (1992:594) contends that in line with Olson's theory, larger groups such as those that would form the membership of the FAA would take longer to organise, 'as they are unlikely to agree on which type of collective good to pursue'. Through successful lobbying by the FAA, in 1921 tenant farmers were given more protection through the regulation of agricultural rents, anti-competitive practices were prohibited (such as the requirement to use a particular supplier) and a minimum four-year lease was established. During the government of Juan Perón, farmers were given long lease extensions, which made leasing unattractive to landowners; this measure, combined with generous loans from the state, enabled many *chacareros* to become landowners. Of the three main farming groups, there is no evidence of involvement of Irish-Argentines in the organisation either historically or in the contemporary era; the vast majority of FAA members are of Italian extraction.

Argentine Confederation of Rural Societies (CRA)

Traditionally, beef production in Argentina was non-vertically integrated. In the poorer non-cultivated land with drainage limitations – the Cuenca del Salado region of Buenos Aires province, the cow-calf system predominated, while in the areas with better soils producing higher quality forage, cattle rearing and fattening prevailed. Prior to the First World War, Argentine meat exports largely consisted of chilled beef. With the advent of the war, Britain introduced chilled beef quotas. At the same time there was a change in the demand

profile. Both Britain and France began to purchase lower quality meat in large quantities, to feed their troops. This led to a rise in the demand for beef overall and a substitution effect towards canned and frozen beef. Between 1914 and 1921 the cattle stock in Argentina increased by 50 per cent (Rock 1987: 204). The boom came to an end in 1921, when Britain ended the stockpiling of Argentine beef.

Although all strands of the beef production sector were impacted by the collapse in demand, the *estancieros* who specialised in cattle fattening were able to mitigate its effects by reverting to the chilled beef trade and maintaining their margins by paying less to breeders. The breeders felt that they were not getting an equitable distribution of the profits from the changed market conditions. Furthermore, the monopolistic practice of the meatpacking firms created further unease. Many of the firms engaged in anti-competitive practices, such as artificially restricting the supply of cattle to Liniers market and paying low prices to producers while at the same time getting good prices on the English market, the principal export destination.

During the government of Marcelo T. Alvear (1922-1928), attempts were made to set a floor price for producers, but these attempts were thwarted by meatpacking plants. This led to tension within the SRA between the breeders and fatteners, and created the pretext for creating a separate interest group, the Confederation of the Association of Rural Societies of Buenos Aires and La Pampa (CARBAP), to represent the interests of smaller and medium breeders. A number of rural societies from the interior of Buenos Aires province affiliated with the organisation, including Trenque Laquen and Azul. Over time, the number of rural societies affiliated to CARBAP increased and other regional groups were founded such as CARCLO, representing the north of Santa Fe, established in 1938. In 1943, the Argentine Confederation of Rural Societies (CRA) was founded to represent these regional groupings at a Federal level.

Historically, Irish-Argentines have played a significant role in the foundation of many of

the rural societies in Buenos Aires province, which would later come under the umbrella of CARBAP and at a federal level the CRA. Thomas Maguire, from Empor, County Westmeath, was one of the founders of the Rural Society of Mercedes in the nineteenth century. A number of Irish-Argentines were founding members of the Rural Society of Suipacha, including Alfredo MacLoughlin (1917-1991) who was its first president. In Santa Fe province, Irish-Argentines were also prominent in the establishment of Rural Societies. As Landaburu (2006: 70) notes, the Rural Society of Rosario established in 1895 included two Irish-Argentines among its founders: Enrique Coffin and Ricardo Murray. Tomás Brendan Kenny (1883-1940), physician and surgeon, born on 23 July 1883 in Salto, was a founding member and first president of the Rural Society of Venado Tuerto.

Today the CRA represents almost 110,000 farmers who belong to three hundred Rural Societies across the country. This is the largest agricultural interest group and has the widest social base, bringing together small, medium and large producers engaged in a wide range of agricultural activities, from livestock to winegrowers, horticulturalists and beekeepers. Of all the groups involved in the farmers' strike, the CRA has the strongest representation of Irish-Argentines through membership of their local Rural Societies. Many play key roles in their local organisations, as well as at regional and Federal level. At the Federal level, Manuel Cabanellas, a descendent of Timothy O'Connor [sic] from County Cork, was a former President of the CRA and played a prominent role in the strike. Jaime Murphy of La Pampa province was Vice-President of CARBAP during the strike and another Irish-Argentine, Mario Conlon, is currently Treasurer of CARBAP.

CONINAGRO

The first rural cooperative established in Argentina dates back to 1898, when a group of French settlers founded a cooperative in Pigüe, in the south of Buenos Aires province, to provide cover against the risk of hail. However,

the first cooperative farming organisation was not created until 1904 in Junín in the north of the province of Buenos Aires. CONINAGRO was founded in 1956 to represent the cooperative movement and has a presence in all the provinces, with a membership of over 500 cooperatives which, according to Besada (2002: 10), represent 20 per cent of the total grain and 26 per cent of the dairy products sold in Argentina. It is estimated that it indirectly represents some 100,000 members. Besides representing the dairy and grain sector, it also acts for producers of rice, cotton, wool, tea and tobacco. Irish-Argentines have played a role in the cooperative movement throughout its history. La Suipachense, a dairy co-op, which is part of the Council of Inter-cooperative Milk Producers and an affiliate of CONINAGRO, has among its past presidents Heriberto MacLoughlin and Guillermo Cánepa Rossiter.

The *autoconvocados*

During the countryside strike a new group emerged, known as the *autoconvocados*. These were people who did not belong to any organised agricultural interest group, but nonetheless made a significant contribution both on an individual and collective basis to organising spontaneous pickets, roadblocks and other forms of protest. This eclectic group of participants included farmers not aligned to any of the agricultural interest groups, commodity traders, students, professionals, service providers, government officials, agricultural machinery dealers and lorry drivers. One prominent independent campaigner was Alejandro Gahan, a veteran of collective action through his leadership in the campaign against the Botnia pulp mill in Uruguay. Alejandro was the victim of an assault by the Government sponsored *piquetero* (8) Luis D'Elía at a countryside protest in March 2008 at the Plaza de Mayo in the city of Buenos Aires, which was filmed live on prime-time TV.

Testimonies of Irish-Argentine participants in the strike

Mercedes Lalor

Mercedes comes from a prominent Irish-Argentine family, who are inextricably linked

with the agricultural sector. Her great-grandfather Juan Lalor came to Argentina from County Wicklow in 1830, where he married another Irish immigrant, Emilia O'Neill. His son Eduardo married Maria Alicia Maguire, whose Irish-Argentine lineage stretched back to 1830. Mercedes made history in September 2008, when she became the first woman to be elected a Board Member of the SRA. She specialises in breeding and fattening Aberdeen Angus cattle.

As president of her local rural society, General Villegas, which is affiliated to both CARBAP and the SRA, she played a key leadership role in the countryside strike. Of particular importance was the work she did on the communications front and in liaison with the other striking organisations. She also engaged political commentators and analysts, such as Rosendo Fraga, an advisor to the Vice-President Julio Cobos, whom she invited to speak at the General Villegas Rural Society. Mercedes believes that the extensive use of 'communications was the defining factor' in creating a successful outcome. The use of text messaging and the internet were central to the mobilisation of the countryside. Another critical factor she opines 'was the media': the countryside was able to effectively exploit the use of television and radio to get their message across, and at the same time generate ratings.

Fernando Boracchia

Fernando Boracchia, a great-great grandson of Diego Gaynor, is president of the Rural Society of Exaltación de la Cruz, Campana and Zárate, a part of Buenos Aires province with a significant concentration of Irish-Argentines. He is a soybean, corn and wheat producer and also fattens cattle for export to the European Union. Fernando played a visible role in the in the countryside strike, appearing on many television programmes and doing interviews for the media. Besides his media role, he also lobbied the mayors and other public officials and organised the first *tractorazo* in Capilla del Señor, which was twenty blocks in length.

He believes that the main reason for the strike's success was that 'the government tried to

subjugate the countryside', a countryside whose 'values are common to everybody, even if they do not own a centimetre of land'. Essentially, Argentine identity and consciousness is closely intertwined with imagery of the countryside, for example the *Pampas*, the ombú tree, gauchos, *mate*, *dulce de leche*, Martín Fierro and beef. This was a key reason why many urban residents with no connection to the countryside also rowed in behind the strikers. Fernando also adds that the country in general 'woke-up to the huge transfers of resources to the Federal Government, which only re-distributes them to their friends'. The political strategy of the Government also turned people off. There was a general feeling of disenchantment with the behaviour of a government that resorted to 'shouting, fighting and intolerance'.

José Garrahan

José Garrahan is an Irish descendent who runs a dairy farm in Carmen de Areco, with a herd of 250 Friesian (Holstein) cows and an annual production of 1,400,000 litres. Like many dairy farmers, due to the low profitability of dairying, he has diversified into soybean, maize and wheat. He is auditor of the Association of Agricultural Producers of Carmen de Areco, an organisation affiliated to CARBAP.

Recounting his experience of the strike he said that 'I never thought we were going to have to go out on to the roads and protest'. A key part of his role was to provide information to drivers who stopped to speak to protesters on the road. He also went from door to door in his community to canvass support and provide information to those who did not have links with the countryside. The principal source of information was communications via the internet from CARBAP. Like the others, he also stressed the importance of text messaging in mobilising support. José believed the key reason why the strike was ultimately successful was because 'the country realised that in one way or another it was dependent on the countryside'.

Edmundo Moore

Edmundo Moore is a sixth-generation Argentine, whose ancestors came from Ireland

by way of the United States in 1827. He farms in Lobos, Buenos Aires province. The family farm 'El Pinos' has been in Moore's family for many generations. He is a cattle farmer and also produces corn, sunflowers and wheat. A current board member and former president of the Rural Society of Lobos, he played an active part in the protests against Resolution 125. Among the roles he played was to distribute information and persuade those with no connection to the land of the merits of the farmers' case.

Edmundo believed that the key reason for success was that 'the countryside united like never before' and 'had the moral upper-hand'. He felt that the Government did everything possible to antagonise the countryside and exhibited nothing more than 'hatred and revenge'.

Mario Conlon

Mario Conlon's great-grandparents emigrated from County Cork in the 1890s. He is Vice-President of the Rural Society of Laprida and treasurer of CARBAP and also presides over the provincial commission that deals with locust plagues. Mario's principal activity is small-scale livestock production and he also administers mixed farms, growing soybeans and other crops combined with livestock, for third parties.

During the countryside strike, as a board member of CARBAP, he played a prominent role in the demonstrations in Rosario and Buenos Aires. Mario also accompanied local producers in the roadside protests and organised *cacerolazos* and *tractorazos* in Laprida. One of his responsibilities was to participate in meetings with legislators prior to the Congress vote. CARBAP's lobbying strategy not only centred on alerting legislators to the impact on producers of Resolution 125, but also the effect it would have on the rural community at a wider level. Another key element of their strategy was to emphasise the point that revenue from the export tax increase would not be directed back into the communities that generated them, but would instead be spent in a discretionary manner by the Government.

He cites a number of factors that led to the success of the strike. Firstly, he cited 'the unity of the producers from the different organisations', who pursued a single, clear objective. Secondly, he mentioned 'the support of the urban classes, which was spurred on by the pronouncements of the President and the behaviour of some of her supporters and cronies'. Thirdly, he commented that the legislature had an opportunity to scrutinise and debate the measure. But above all he believes the decisive factor was 'persistence'.

Conclusion

Changes in the structure of Argentine agriculture in recent years, driven by technological and financial innovations, have led to the emergence of new actors in the sector, such as various suppliers of services and inputs and private investors. The sector 'has moved towards creating production and innovation networks based on relationships that go beyond specific commercial ties governed by prices' (Bisang 2008) – a point that did not seem to be well understood by Government policy makers. These symbiotic relationships created a basis for the disparate interests groups to join together under a large umbrella group, the Liaison Commission, and succeed in collective action.

From a political science perspective, the success of the strike challenges Olson's theory that large groups were unlikely to achieve their objectives through collective action - and if they did that it would be a lengthy organic process. The testimonies of Irish-Argentines who participated in the strike give us a powerful insight on a practical level into the methods deployed by the interest groups and how they contributed to a successful outcome. Beyond the boundaries of those with an interest in the agricultural sector, the strike also drew general support from those who were critical of a style of Government has been termed 'hyper-presidential' by Berensztein (2008: 48), ignoring the realities of a federal system, and also from those worried about the quality of the institutions of state.

John Kennedy

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Notes

1 The Jefes de Hogar (Heads of Household) Project is the workfare part of a social safety net launched by Argentina in April 2002 to alleviate the impact of rising unemployment due to the worsening economic crisis.

2 The price actually charged at the producing country's port of loading.

3 Tractor protests or "tractorcades": these are a common form of protest by the farming sector in the European Union.

4 This is a form of popular protest in Argentina whereby people create noise by banging pots, pans and other utensils.

5 Liniers cattle mart is the major livestock trade centre in Argentina.

6 Fiscal federalism deals with how competencies (expenditure side) and fiscal instruments (revenue side) are allocated across different (vertical) layers of the government.

7 The difference between the relative revenue and spending responsibilities of the Federal Government and provinces is known as a vertical fiscal imbalance.

8 A piquetero is a member of a politically orientated group, whose modus operandi is to organise groups to picket businesses or block roads in pursuit of a particular demand.

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