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## Newly IFA president expected to be radical

By Sean MacConnell

The man who has pledged to "eliminate the bureaucratic monster" in farming, Mr John Dillon, was last night elected president of the largest farm organisation, the Irish Farmers' Association.

Mr Dillon, an outspoken opponent of officialdom, is likely to attempt to make the 80,000-strong organisation more radical in its approach to its problems.

Born in Co Limerick, Mr Dillon (53) has been described as "fearless and determined when faced with a challenge".

No one would doubt his lack of courage or his doggedness as he has been at the centre of some of the most aggressive IFA protests in recent years, although he has been eclipsed in recent times by the president, Mr Tom Parlon.

His presidency is likely to be totally different from the relaxed style presented by Mr Parlon, who has been a consummate media performer over the past four years. Mr Dillon, a father of seven sons and two daughters, lives and farms 120 acres in Pallasgreen, in east Limerick, where his family has lived for 300 years.

Deeply rooted in rural Ireland, he is less interested in presenting a gentle face to the public than delivering to his members.

He credits himself as the man who forced the IFA to blockade the Irish meat export factories for almost a month in January 2000, an action which cost the factories dear and brought better prices for beef farmers but cost the IFA £500,000 in fines.

He personally led a sit-in at the EU headquarters in Dublin later the same year.

This action resulted in the Taoiseach, Mr Ahern, settling a farmer grievance over headage which led to payments of £400 million to farmers in disadvantaged areas over the next six years.

He was sitting in again later in the year, this time at Monaghan Poultry Products, where he won major concessions for poultry-breeders not only in Monaghan.

Outspoken about his critics and billing himself as "the saviour for a farming population feeling the pressure of being crushed out of existence by officialdom", Mr Dillon's self-description, that "you get what you see", is regarded by many as accurate.

In a sense Mr Dillon, who is the first deputy president of the organisation to move from deputy to president without having to allow a term pass, is probably more representative of the real face of farming than predecessors.

Less articulate than Mr Parlon, he has the western fire of John Donnelly and the energy which marked the presidency of Alan Gillis.

The new president, who prides himself on his honesty, does not court popularity, relying rather on delivery.

No one will doubt his ability to get things done because his victory last night came against heavy odds and even history itself.

His immediate task will be to mesh with the IFA machine of 70 full-time personnel in Dublin, the regions and Brussels - a task, insiders say, which will be as difficult as winning the top job.