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Taoiseach Brian Cowen with Mary Cleary at Glenisk Dairy, Killeigh, Co Offaly, which he officially opened yesterday. JAMES FLYNN/APX

First cut is far from the deepest as sharp Brian gets in some early scissor practice



LISE HAND

BRIAN hovered expectantly over the blue ribbon yesterday afternoon, a pair of scissors at the ready.

He gave the scissors a few experimental snips to make sure they were in full working order, and when all of the photographers were lined up, he sliced through the ribbon with a steady hand. No harm in get-

ting a bit of practice in - after all, it was his first cut of the week - with plenty more cuts to come.

The Taoiseach was down on his home turf, possibly enjoying the last piece of familiar ground before he and his Government set sail tomorrow into the uncharted waters - of which Brian has been speaking much about in recent recessionary weeks. He was opening the Glenisk Organic Dairy in Killeigh, a few miles outside Tullamore - now the biggest organic dairy in the country.

On his arrival, he was taken on a tour of the gleaming plant; the place was spotless, from floor to ceiling.

"It's like a hospital, only cleaner," whispered one impressed visitor.

The business has boomed in the past 10 years - in its first year of organic production, in 1995, Glenisk produced 500,000

pots of organic yoghurt a year. Now it churns out 500,000 pots every week.

This is a level of profitable productivity which Brian must have secretly wished was emulated by various departments under his own watch.

In his introduction to the Taoiseach, Glenisk's managing director Vincent Cleary made a couple of references to the "skinny politician" who had witnessed the company's early days. But Glenisk is not the only thing that has expanded since those times - a fact ruefully pointed out by Brian.

"I'd like to say first off the bat that my changing shape has nothing to do with Glenisk products," he declared.

"In fact, it's the absence of Glenisk products," he confessed cheerfully.

Perhaps, it's a bit like Flann O'Brien's theory of atomics in 'The Third Policeman', whereby

constant close proximity of man and bicycle involves an exchange of molecules ending in a half-man, half-bicycle; but the Taoiseach seems increasingly to have swapped molecules with John Gormley.

Just over a week ago, he was launching electric lorries, and yesterday he was enthusing over pushing ahead with the Government's plan to reach a target of 5pc (up from the current level of less than 1pc) of Irish farming land to be producing organic stuff by 2012.

Challenge

"This will obviously be quite a challenge," he said.

"But the Government is determined to get there," he added stoutly, sounding every bit as Green as Kermit himself.

It won't be green that's on his mind today, but the more pressing colour of red, and how to stop the country sliding into

that particular shade over the coming year or two. Talking to the press afterwards, he wasn't ruling out cuts of any kinds - including taking a scalpel to the HSE.

"There are no painless ways by which you can try and remove certain expenditures in order to maintain spending limits that we've set," he said. "The Government will have to take some sensible decisions tomorrow to make sure we work within the existing spending limits we've set ourselves this year, since we won't have the revenues we were hoping for."

However, he hinted that today's first cut won't necessarily be the deepest, and that next year might see him getting out his biggest scissors. "Tomorrow is the first phase of a series of measures," he said ominously.

We're about to find out what lies in store. We're all off on a Offaly Big Adventure.