

# Opinion & Analysis

## Time for Tesco to change its tune on Unicef



**JOHN  
GIBBONS**

**W**HEN ALI Hewson, Stephen Rea, Marian Finucane, Colin Farrell, Ryan Tubridy and rugby star Donncha O'Callaghan are on your side, who could possibly be against you? This is the question that must have Unicef Ireland's staff and high-profile supporters scratching their heads in disbelief in recent weeks.

One of Unicef's most successful fundraising programmes has been its "Change for Good" campaign, which encourages airline passengers to donate unwanted currency. It has raised over €6.8 million since the campaign began in

1987, linking here with an Aer Lingus tie-in 10 years later. But nothing in Unicef's long and distinguished history of caring for children in need could have prepared it for the attentions of one supermarket chain.

Earlier this year, Tesco Ireland launched a campaign promoting price cuts. Its name? "Change for Good". This is "the first time in Unicef's history that a commercial entity has purposely set out to capitalise on one of our campaigns", is what Unicef says on its website – [www.unicef.ie/news250.htm](http://www.unicef.ie/news250.htm)

The effect, adds executive director, Melanie Verwoerd, is to "damage an income stream which several of our programmes for children are dependent on". Tesco's response – [www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2009/0725/1224251305112.html](http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2009/0725/1224251305112.html) – appears to infer it had simply never heard of the Unicef slogan.

Could it really be that not a single Tesco executive has flown transatlantic with our national carrier in the last two decades? Tesco's legal loophole is that even though Unicef had trademarked the phrase "Change for Good", this only protects it for charitable and not commercial usage.

Irish Farmers' Association president Pádraig Walshe recently described Ireland's powerful supermarket groups as "out of control". None is bigger, nor it

### ONLINE

Have **Your Say** on  
this article at  
[irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com)

seems, more controlling or profitable than Tesco, with 86 stores and a staff of 12,500. As Paul Cullen revealed in *The Irish Times* in May, Tesco Ireland makes a 9.5 per cent profit margin – over 50 per cent higher than its parent company.

Through its Clubcard scheme, Tesco holds vast amounts of information about hundreds of thousands of Irish people. If you also sign up for a Tesco credit card and mobile phone, you will be entrusting information about everything you buy, everywhere you go and everyone you communicate with to a single corporation.

This behemoth may know infinitely more about you than the Government and probably more than your own spouse.

One of the axioms of economics is that weakly regulated markets tend towards monopoly. In resisting regulation of big

business – usually in the name of consumer choice – free market advocates in fact deliver the market into the hands of the most ruthlessly efficient monopolists.

Diversity is the hallmark of healthy, resilient systems. A high street with independently owned shops, from butchers to newsagents and greengrocers, is the sign of a thriving local community and economy.

These businesses mostly use locally sourced supplies and provide downstream employment. When overwhelming competition from multiples pushes these businesses to the wall, there is a net loss of wealth, employment and genuine consumer choice. The social fabric that binds communities together is also weakened.

Fine Gael's Michael Creed likens our retail sector to the Wild West, where Irish producers and suppliers are being slaughtered: his party has drafted a food Bill in an attempt to rein in the multiples.

Chains dominate the food and retail sectors. Suppliers and producers live in fear of delisting, and there's the question of "hello money" which, it has been claimed, some supermarkets demand. Fine Gael reckon this may amount to over €3 million a week. Even the powerful Irish farming lobby seems helpless as the multiples put on the squeeze. Prices paid to farmers fell

by 15 per cent in the last year, yet retail food prices fell by 3.3 per cent.

The situation for third-world suppliers is much worse. According to the UN, the long-term downward pressure on the price of farm produce "threatens the food security of hundreds of millions of people in some of the world's poorest countries". That two-for-one bargain in your multiple can mean ruin for an Irish supplier – or starvation for families in poor countries.

After lobbying by Eddie Hobbs and others, the 1987 Groceries Order (which prevented below-cost selling) was scrapped four years ago. The real impact of this, said Tara Buckley of RGdata, which represents independent grocers, was to allow the supermarkets "to sell cheap booze to get people in the door". The cost of food, she insists, did not go down, but "lots of producers have been screwed and there have been huge job losses". The multiples may simply believe themselves too big or powerful to be constrained by the norms of society.

I have registered a non-commercial website where this article, as well as links to other material examining the practices of the multiples, will be hosted. I have never heard of anyone else using a similar slogan, so who could possibly object? The address is: [www.everylittlehelps.ie](http://www.everylittlehelps.ie)